Written by Mark Jaeger
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FINISHING WORK ON the showroom of Lake Shore Kitchens at the Shoppes of Port Washington were Peter Burke and Brian Marquardt.

Photo by Mark Jaeger

Owner says dividing retail space offers options for start-up businesses

The tide may have finally turned for the former Lueptow's Furniture building in downtown Port Washington, and the transition is coming one small space at a time.

The city's largest commercial building has sat largely empty since the furniture store closed nearly four years ago.

Owner Merton Lueptow now has three tenants in the building at 211 N. Franklin St. he calls the Shoppes of Port Washington.

The largest space is occupied by Lake Shore Kitchens, cabinetry business owned by Peter Burke and Brian Marquardt.

The men are using the storefront location to display home remodeling products and as a meeting place for customers. They specialize in woodwork by Bertch Cabinets, Wellborn Forest and International Kitchen Supply.

"We have both done a lot of remodeling work and even built a house together, but we wanted to start a business where we would work with contractors and take care of all the problems that can come up," Burke said.

"The idea is we would be the ones setting up the delivery of materials or dealing with missing hardware or scratched doors. With this location, we also expect to attract individual customers

looking to remodel."

Lake Shore Kitchens works with a stable of local, licensed subcontractors, including countertop specialist Bella Stone from Fredonia and Wester Electric of Belgium.

"We have customers come in and say they want one contractor who will do all the work. That's really not what you want. You want someone who knows what they are doing at every level," Marquardt said.

"Our shop can handle everything from low-end apartment remodels to the beachfront home where the owner wants to go all out on fixtures."

None of the actual wood working will be done in the former storefront.

"This will be our showcase. And when we are out at job sites, this location will still give our business a lot of visibility," Burke said. "As more shops come into the building, we are hoping to pick up business from their customers."

So far, the other tenants are Funky Fine Art owned by artist Deb Melton, and a full-service alterations shop called Jane's Handy Sewing.

Burke said he and Marquardt stumbled onto the Lueptow's location by accident while looking into advertising for their new business.

"While in the newspaper office we saw the ad for space in the Lueptow's building. Within a half hour we were inside checking out the space with Merton," Burke said.

The option of starting small yet having room to grow was appealing to the owners of the start-up business.

"At one time we were even thinking about our own building, but that wasn't going to happen in this economy," Marquardt said. "When we learned how reasonable the rent was for the space, it became a real no-brainer."

The cabinetry shop is renting 600 square feet, but the former store offers almost unlimited space for expansion.

"There is 8,000 square feet on each floor, so there is plenty of room to grow," Lueptow said of the four-story building.

"With all the room that is available, we should be able to handle at least 20 different shops, including a mix of bigger and smaller shops. I could put in a huge business and still have lots of room for other shops. The goal is to have diversity in the businesses."

Lueptow said the Shoppes of Port Washington should be seen as a practical alternative for

start-up businesses that don't have capital for the high rents sought elsewhere.

"I think this should be a real shot in the arm for new businesses and a boost for the entire downtown," he said.

The initial lease for tenants is for six months, followed by month-to-month rental agreements. That timing allows Lueptow flexibility because the building is still on the market.

"With all of the approvals involved in that kind of transaction, I thought it was unlikely that any sale could be completed in less than six month," Lueptow said.

Having tenants in the building could make it more appealing to prospective buyers, too.

"In today's world, a buyer is more likely to be an investor looking for a source of income instead of someone who wants a single, large retail space. The renters would provide that income," Lueptow said.

"I am very optimistic that this concept is going to work. I keep getting calls about space, which tells you there is a market for something like this."