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New clothing retailer seen as impetus for surge in downtown shopping

Tick, tick, tick.

Procrastinators should be warned that the shopping days until Christmas are rapidly passing.

Although there are no hard numbers at this point, merchants in downtown Port Washington are reporting strong sales in the weeks leading up to the biggest gift-giving day of the year.

The news along the city's prime commercial corridor has not been as rosy in recent years because of a weak economy.

However, a slow financial turnaround and a renewed vigor in Port's downtown appear to be paying dividends in the bottom lines of many local shop owners.

Port Washington Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Lisa Crivello said there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that businesses are enjoying a larger share of Christmas cheer this year

"I am pretty excited about how Christmas has been going in Port. Based on the number of people we have stopping in at the Visitor Center, there seems to be a lot more enthusiasm this year," Crivello said.

Buoyed by the opening this fall of the Duluth Trading Co. store on Franklin Street, she said, there is a steady flow of out-of-town visitors coming to Port.

"For example, one recent weekend we had some people from Iowa stop in at our office on their way to a Packers game. We pointed them to Duluth Trading Co. and Bernie's Fine Meats, and a little while later they returned to say how much they enjoyed Port. They said, 'You have a real nice little town here,'" Crivello said.

Port Washington is typically an appealing tourist destination during the warmer months, when cooling breezes off Lake Michigan can counter the summer swelter.

"We generally don't have a lot of people visiting Port this time of year, especially when the cold wind blows off the lake from the northeast," Crivello said.

Even area residents are showing new enthusiasm for shopping options in downtown Port in response to what is seen as a local renaissance, she said..

"When people see the improvements being made to the old Lueptow's building (Boerner Mercantile) and all the facade work and painting being done, the business community is showing its pride in being here and people want to check out everything that is going on," she said.

Crivello credited the efforts of Port Washington Main Street for creating a downtown buzz by

hosting additional events and sponsoring programs intended to upgrade local properties.

Scott Schweizer, owner of Anchor Men's Wear, 121 N. Franklin St., has been selling clothing downtown for 35 years and said there is a noticeable surge in traffic this holiday season.

"I guess you could say I was somewhat skeptical when I heard how much traffic Duluth Trading Co. was expected to generate, but they have done everything they said they would and more," Schweizer said.

His store is located across the street from the new clothing retailer.

"There is a bit of overlap in our products, although we offer high-end name labels and they carry the Duluth brand, which is still quality stuff," Schweizer said.

He said he has noticed customers will often come to his store after shopping at Duluth Trading Co.

"We are selling a lot of Pendleton shirts, which are heavy outdoor wear that complements what they buy at Duluth," Schweizer said.

If you are looking for a trendy gift, he said, the hottest item at his store this holiday season is the Stormy Kromer hat.

"They seem to appeal to all ages, too," Schweizer said.

Steve Bennett of nearby Bernie's Fine Meats said the impact of Duluth Trading Co. is undeniable.

"It is unbelievable the number of their brown bags I see in our store," Bennett said.

"I bought this business eight years ago, and things have really changed in Port since then. We as a business community went through some really tough times, but it looks like the downtown is experiencing an upswing now," he said.

"It is so important to get people to walk through downtown and stop in at the local shops. Just give us a chance to show what we can do for you."

Despite the optimism in the air, Bennett warned his fellow business owners of the cyclical nature of trade in the lakefront community.

"It is great to see so much traffic in our downtown, but I hope those who are doing well now are banking some of that money to get through the long winter until tourists return in summer," Bennett said.

As for holiday fare, he said, his store is selling a lot of customized gift boxes of sausage and cheese that are often shipped to out-of-town destinations.

Even newcomers to downtown Port are feeling the swelling Christmas spirit.

Lisa Kien of the Shoppes of Port Washington said there is a marked increase in the number of people roaming downtown.

Kien and Mike Gostomski operated Sports Images & More in the former Lueptow's building last year and have since relocated with the collective to a former gift shop on Franklin Street.

"There is definitely increased foot traffic. People come in and associate the new location with retail sales from the days it was Heart & Home and even the Ben Franklin Store," she said.

The Shoppes of Port Washington now includes 20 vendors, along with display space set aside for area churches and nonprofit groups.

As it did last weekend, the shops will host a holiday event with Santa from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 15.