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## Aurora helps those who help themselves

### City backing downtown development?

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July 5, 2009

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In February of 2008, the city of Aurora approved a development agreement with Ballydoyle, offering the Irish pub a \$2.26 million incentive to move into a building on New York Street. The pub opened a year later, and with the help of a huge publicity push from the city, Ballydoyle has been doing very well.

Last month, downtown's original Irish pub, Tavern on the Fox, closed its doors after 16 years on Broadway. Owner Sean Gorman has a new restaurant, Tavern off the Fox, on South Eola Road, and as he bid goodbye to the downtown, he took a few parting shots.

The city, he said, does not support established businesses, like Tavern on the Fox, with the same zeal it shows for new businesses, like Ballydoyle. Gorman said those who have been in downtown longest, like him, deserve to get the same financial support and attention lavished on newcomers.

But is he right? Does the city favor new businesses over long-running ones?

To find out, you need to start with some statistics. For one thing, only a few downtown businesses have lasted as long as Gorman's. Between 2007 and 2009, with the national economy in the throes of its decline, downtown lost 58 businesses, according to city records. Many went under, like El Meson de Maria on Downer Place. Some migrated to other places, like Tavern on the Fox and The Beacon News, which moved from South River Street to North Commons Drive on the far East Side in March 2008.

In that time, 27 new businesses have opened -- none with the same fanfare that greeted Ballydoyle. This includes restaurants such as Jimmy John's and New China Hut #3 at River Street Plaza, and the River's Edge Café, which replaced Bag and Brew on Downer Place. But it also includes social service agencies such as Triple Threat Mentoring, and new insurance and real estate offices.

### Help is available

That leaves a lot of empty storefronts, however, and helps to explain why Downtown Development Director Karen Christensen spends so much time trying to help new businesses succeed. And it explains her frustration. She says she offers plenty of help for business owners downtown, but very few of them take advantage of it.

The help is not just financial, although there is some of that, and it is well-used. In addition to Tax Increment Financing assistance and Section 108 loans, available to businesses who will use them to create jobs, Christensen's department gets \$350,000 a year to hand out as grants for interior and exterior architectural assistance.

Property owners can use this money, as can businesses with five-year (or longer) leases. The amount of money available differs from building to building.

That money is entirely used every year, she said -- there's about \$104,000 left for 2009 -- and there's often a waiting list of businesses that don't get their applications in before the funds run out. Those applications are rolled over to the following year, she said.

### **Investment 'substantial'**

But is \$350,000 a year enough of an investment in downtown businesses?

Mayoral Chief of Staff Bill Wiet answers the question with a "rising tide lifts all boats" analogy. The city pumps more than \$1 million a year into downtown through the TIF program, funding projects such as the Paramount Theatre's recent expansion, and that brings more people downtown, helping businesses to succeed, he said.

The city's responsibility, Wiet said, is to keep the buildings downtown up to code. The city invests in the infrastructure, not the businesses inhabiting it, because of the high turnover. Hence the money for rehab projects, downtown sewer separations and other initiatives.

"The amount of investment in downtown has been substantial," he said. And if businesses want more, they are welcome to draft development agreements, as did Ballydoyle and developer Steve Arwady, who plans to bring residential and commercial to the old Elks Club building on Stolp Avenue.

It's up to Christensen and her staff to work with the individual businesses. To that end, they host free seminars on business planning, and have partnered with Waubensee Community College's Small Business Development Center to mentor business owners. She also works with Aurora Downtown, a group of business owners trying to help the entire area flourish.

But few take advantage of these offers, she said. A recent seminar in March drew 13 people. A follow-up in April drew 10.

### **Accept the assistance**

One of the most frustrating business owners, Christensen said, was Gorman, who only took \$11,500 in financial help (out of more than \$80,000 available to him) and never took advantage of other assistance, city records show.

"If people aren't motivated to succeed, there's a limited amount that government or business organizations can do," Christensen said.

Mayor Tom Weisner was infamously more direct during the recent election, saying some downtown businesses fail because they deserve to.

So what does it take to maintain a long-running business downtown, and how much help should the city be expected to provide?

Ask John Galles, and he'll say the city already does enough. Galles' store, John's Main Surplus, is one of the oldest downtown -- he bought the East Downer Place building in 1989, but he's been there since 1946. Galles has taken just over \$11,000 in assistance from the city -- for exterior restoration. In 2002, he replaced the windows on his second floor, and paid half of that job with a \$9,750 city grant.

"The problem is, some people want something for nothing," Galles said. "We get plenty of support."

The secret to sticking around, he said, is to be active in the community and establish friendships with your customers. And work very hard: "My days are 12-hour days," he said.

## Parking main problem

Ernesto Ochoa, manager of Muebleria Sergio furniture store on Downer Place, said the city has helped with his building, but not with his business, which has been slow lately. Muebleria Sergio has been there for 14 years, and Ochoa has taken a significant amount of city assistance -- over \$93,000, for interior and exterior work. And he attends Christensen's seminars and other activities.

But he said if offered, he would gladly take a low-interest business loan from the city, since banks are not offering them in this economy.

His biggest gripe with the city is the downtown parking situation. If the city really wants to support businesses here, he said, they will improve parking.

Guille Valencia agreed. Her father, Rafael Valencia, owns Tecalitlan Mexican Restaurant on South Broadway, and the family has been in business downtown for 29 years. She said the lack of downtown parking makes it difficult to draw in customers, and she's heard from more than one person who drove around downtown several times, looking for a spot, before giving up and leaving.

The city has taken a wait-and-see attitude, hoping a private entity will build a new parking deck downtown. In the meantime, city officials are working with business owners on lot-sharing agreements.

As for financial assistance, Tecalitlan has used more than \$73,000 in grants for interior and exterior rehab. The restaurant remodeled in 2005, with a nearly \$40,000 city grant to help.

Christensen believes Tecalitlan is the model for downtown. Their service is outstanding, she said, and the family makes it a point to take advantage of the programs she offers.

In the end, she said, whether the downtown business is new or well-established, it is up to the owner to make sure it sticks around. The city can only do so much.

"Owning your own business is harder than anyone can tell you," she said. "You have to be prepared to work 24 hours a day, seven days a week, doing everything from cleaning toilets to advertising. You have to not just show up every morning, but be there all day, because no one you hire will care as much about the business as you do."

"And," she said, "you have to be willing to take suggestions from people who really want you to succeed."

jmg434 wrote:

I am not surprised that Tavern on the Fox has gone out of business. I know a lot of people have fond memories of Tavern, but the last time I was there a number of the chairs were broken, the special board was so filled with chalk dust it was unreadable, and my menu was sticky. That is not the experience I want to have when I go out for lunch. Those issues are not issues fixed by the city. Those are simple things that a business owner can take care of with out spending a lot of money. There are other options downtown, and I choose to spend my money at restaurants with chairs without upholstery tears and clean menus.

7/6/2009 1:29 PM CDT on [suburbanchicagonews.com](http://suburbanchicagonews.com)

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skipster wrote:

Discussions about downtown Aurora's struggle rarely step back and consider the wider view. Literally. Who wants to go downtown when you have to drive through a ghetto to get there? Naperville residents and east side Aurorans have always been put off by the dangerous visual messages that east New York street puts out. Now we have to add Lake Street to the "this looks like a bad area" club. A co-worker recently found herself in Aurora by Carson Pirie Scott and told me "I was afraid to get out of my car." If you drive south on Lake from 88, the area south of Indian Trail and north of Illinois Ave pretty much looks like a seedy mess. And we wonder why our downtown can't seem to gain any momentum? It's not rocket science, people!

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