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Cape Coral has plan for downtown

'Business has flatlined,' says one cafe owner

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The napkins are neatly pressed, and the tables at Cape Coral's Dinner Bell Cafe are set and ready for the lunch crowd.

Time passes, and the downtown restaurant remains mostly empty.

Cafe owner Mark Moore said he's barely getting by. The struggling economy has forced many business owners to close the past few years, and many still around said they're only making enough to keep on the lights.

But interest in the area remains strong, and business owners and the Community Redevelopment Agency agree the area can improve by addressing five key problems, offering incentives and embracing change. Downtown areas elsewhere in Lee County are beginning to see the benefits of changes they've put in place.

There are about 550 businesses in the 440-acre downtown, and that's about 100 fewer than in 2006, said Helen Ramey, public relations coordinator with the CRA, which covers the downtown area. Those businesses include real estate offices, restaurants and retail shops.

"I think the concern here is retail, shopping," said Moore, who opened his cafe along Southeast 47th Terrace in 2007. "We need something to attract people ... business has flatlined. We're not really seeing any growth from year to year."

The CRA has incentives to bring more businesses to the area, and new business owners can apply for a grant that offers up to \$500 off their rent every month for a year. Just last week, the CRA was contacted by three business prospects and there's plenty of room.

The downtown commercial and industrial space vacancy rate is at 13 percent with more than 252,000 square feet of available space, according to a recent study by CoStar Group. In 2005, it was at less than 2 percent. Overall in Cape Coral, the rate is at 15 percent and at 16 percent in Lee County.

John Jacobsen, executive director of the CRA, said five problems must be tackled before downtown Cape Coral can be a place to live, work, dine, shop and be entertained: storm water retention, parking, transportation, building heights and small lot sizes, which keep larger businesses from the area.

Jon Jaroszewski, 34, usually spends time downtown when he visits his parents. "I think they could make (the area) more parking- and walking-friendly," he said.

Jacobsen said central parking would be a good beginning.

Slowing down traffic also would allow businesses to get noticed. The area has five large parking lots spread across the downtown area as well as limited parking spaces in front of each business.

A recent study showed there's approximately \$74 million being spent on furniture, clothing, food, and entertainment within a five-minute drive of the downtown area.

The CRA recently hired Bernard Zyscovich — a world renowned architect and planner — to assess the area's economic state. He'll come up with a viable plan to improve downtown and bring in more visitors and foot traffic.

The group is hoping the plan will include fixes to the five problems.

Zyscovich's work, which was contracted at a cost of \$203,900, will take about eight months to complete. Then, it's up to the CRA to carry out the plan.

In other areas

Across the river in Fort Myers, downtown business has benefited from last December's completion of the Streetscape project, which tore up roads and limited pedestrian access, said Don Paight, executive director of the Fort Myers Redevelopment Agency.

New boutiques and a restaurant have been added to downtown streets.

The city also is moving forward with a more than \$700,000 downtown redevelopment plan. By late this year, Paight said the city could start to see the plan's changes take affect. This includes digging an inlet into the Caloosahatchee River so its waters would move back a block farther than they do now.

Small businesses continue to be the lifeblood of downtown Bonita Springs.

"The Old 41 area is pretty healthy and thriving," said Christine Ross, president and CEO of the Bonita Springs Area Chamber of Commerce.

Elizabeth Rodriguez, owner of Daniella's Closet on Old 41 and Wilson Street also said events such as Saturday's Celebrate Bonita help bring foot traffic to downtown.

Cape Coral has plenty of community events that take place downtown such as farmers' markets, the Festival of the Arts and Red, White and Boom. But Pete Simone, 63, who has owned Pete's Philly Steaks for 14 years, hopes to see even more events in the future.

He said business has been terrible over the past few years up until three weeks ago. "The whole winter was bad," Simone said. "The snowbirds made a difference, but a lot of my regular customers have been out of work."

Additional Facts

Commercial and industrial space vacancy rates

- Lee County: 16 percent
 - Cape Coral: 15 percent
 - Downtown Cape Coral: 13 percent
 - Downtown Bonita Springs: 13 percent
 - Downtown Fort Myers: 14 percent
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