

Business

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Denise Newsome of Westland decorates a Christmas tree Tuesday in downtown Plymouth. More than 70 trees were sponsored by local businesses. Downtown shopping districts are hoping to draw holiday shoppers away from the malls. (Steve Perez / The Detroit News)

Small shops fight to get slice of big-box action

Dale Buss/ Special to The Detroit News

The holiday shopping season is crucial for every retailer, but even more so for small shops in shopping districts in Detroit and the suburbs.

In places like Birmingham, Plymouth and Rochester, merchants and downtown development authorities team up to try to lure shoppers with promotions and brightly lit street fronts.

Although it isn't a major player in Black Friday activities, Detroit has a few national

retailers with stores such as Jos. A. Bank in the Renaissance Center and Staples on Jefferson Avenue that are opening at 5 a.m. and 6 a.m., respectively, to get a slice of the action.

"The name of the game at the holiday is traffic," said Kenneth J. Dalto, a Farmington Hills-based consultant to small and midsize retailers. "They have to do 50 to 70 percent of their yearly sales, and in some cases even more, in this two-month period."

An additional help is the second annual American Express-funded promotion called Small Business Saturday.

"We want to help put the day in the hands of small-business owners to make the day their own," said Mary Ann Fitzmaurice Reilly, senior vice president of American Express' Open program for small businesses.



From left, Mary Ann Victor, Kerri Vizena, owners of The Silk Worm, and Patricia Botkin, of Talmer Bank and Trust, in Rochester.

The company will be hosting rallies and other events in Detroit. It will provide a \$25 credit to any AmEx cardholder who spends at least \$25 at a small business on Saturday. There also will be drawings for \$25 gift cards to be spent at local shops.

For Old World Olive Press and other stores in downtown Plymouth, Small Business Saturday will be one keystone day in the crucial holiday stretch.

Grand Rapids-based Old World opened its second location in Plymouth two years ago in large part "because of its walkability," said co-owner Shasta Fase.

"We also wanted to make sure of the ability of the community to offer events to its people."

Old World is one of about 30 Plymouth stores that have put together a gingerbread house display and contest.

The local chamber of commerce also has added a Dec. 15 "Men's Panic Party" to its slate of Christmas promotions, which includes "Dashing Through the Stores" for women Dec. 1.

"We're still a vibrant town, and we've remained so through the downfall of the economy," said Teri Fry, Plymouth's downtown events manager.

"And the new merchants in town get especially enthusiastic about these kinds of events because of what it means for their traffic."

Detroit businesses also are trying to lure shoppers. The Fisher Building is hosting Reigniting Retail for local retailers, designers and artists to showcase their products on Dec. 2 and 3.

Holiday promotions have helped fuel a business boom for Rochester since the downtown development authority there launched its Big Bright Lights show six years ago. During the first year, merchants reported a collective 29 percent rise in Christmas-season sales, followed by annual boosts of 15 percent since, said Kristi Trevarrow of the Rochester Downtown Development Authority.

Mary Ann Victor and Kerri Vizona especially are looking forward to the season because they just bought The Silk Worm, a downtown retail institution of more than two decades.

"The light show ... makes Rochester a destination for people from all over southeast Michigan, so the sheer volume of additional customers is great," Victor said. "And we have so many new offerings in our store that people don't know about yet."

Rochester also benefits from its annual Christmas parade televised by WXYZ-TV, being held this year on Dec. 4. The grand marshal of last year's parade, Patricia Botkin, argues that Rochester reaps the dividends from all of the promotions.

"It really has put Rochester on the map," said the president of Talmer Bank & Trust in the city.

Birmingham likewise fights for recognition, especially with the upscale Somerset Collection located a few miles to the northeast.

The Birmingham Principal Shopping District publishes a magazine three times a year, with the latest issue going out to about 40,000 households in the area.

The Oakland County community uses promotions like the shopper-oriented Magic of Birmingham and a German-style outdoor market scheduled for Shain Park on Dec. 2.

"Every downtown has to have a strong calendar of events," said John Heiney, executive director of Birmingham Principal. "Especially this time of year, we need to give people lots of reasons to come down."

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