

The Marion Star

Strong downtown key to future growth

Anthony Conchel The Marion Star 12:01 a.m. EDT March 25, 2015



Todd Filiater uses a sander on a set of window frames he's making in the basement workshop of Yes We Wood, the newest business at The Marketplace, 190 W. Center St. His is one of a several smaller businesses that have opened at the location.(Photo: James Miller/Marion Star)

MARION – Lois Fisher believes in the downtown. She has put a substantial investment behind that philosophy converting old buildings into shops, offices and lofts.

“It’s because I have such fond memories of downtown,” Fisher said.

She began her work career with the law firm of Maloney and Kelly. “I used to go every day for lunch downtown and I shopped downtown. For 20 years, it was engrained in me,” Fisher said.

Now Fisher is helping up-start entrepreneurs in their quest to make a living and do so in an affordable manner.

Several small businesses have opened in The Marketplace, thanks to Fisher’s efforts. Recently a handful of them began operations, providing the downtown with more shopping options.

Fisher said she's happy to provide a way into the retail marketplace for people who have the ambition to start a business, but possibly not the funding. She offers six-month leases to initial tenants as she monitors The Marketplace's progress.

The cost of starting a small business, downtown or otherwise, can be prohibitive.

"We have dreamers and doers. We want to help people with a business plan so they can be successful in Marion, Ohio," Fisher said.

She calls The Marketplace "an entrepreneurial incubator." Fisher said it allows someone "to explore that greatest dream."

Fisher isn't alone in her support for a strong downtown.

"I believe that downtown Marion is the heart of our community. By having a strong heart, our community is strong," said Beth Meadows, board president of Downtown Marion Inc.

"I've likened it to a physical body. You need a strong heart to walk, to do much of anything. It is the same with a community. If you have a strong downtown, everything else kind of takes care of itself," said Meadows, who has been involved with the group about three years.

Meadows said Downtown Marion Inc. wants to create a destination place, "where people are proud to call home. It was once a vibrant part of our city and we're trying to re-create some of that luster."

Meadows said it's important to create foot traffic and also to beautify the section of the city. The group annually sponsors, among other events, the New Year's Eve popcorn ball drop downtown.

"Our goal as an organization is to create an atmosphere that attracts both businesses and people, create events and add color to the downtown," she said. "Even things like flower boxes make it more attractive."

The vision of Downtown Marion, Inc. is the revitalization of downtown Marion as a central hub of the community, restoring it to its former state of functionality, accessibility and profitability. Another group is focusing its efforts on ways to revitalize the lower downtown area.

Fisher said one aspect of downtown is the historic buildings, many of which she has helped preserve.

"They built these buildings to last for hundreds of years and they will ... if we take care of them," Fisher said. She said she is on her 24th building.

Citing examples such as Park Place, Fisher thinks that is the cornerstone of a thriving downtown.

"You have Park Place, which used to be Kresge's. It's progress out of necessity," Fisher said.

Charleston Place, she said, has about six shops operating. Fisher describes it as “a mini-mall” downtown and said the structures are similar in design.

“It’s going back to our roots, having a small business (on the ground floor) and having living space upstairs,” Fisher said. “Where else do you have a Palace Theatre or The Warehouse restaurant? Those are uniquely Marion.”

Fisher said the community has been good to her and her family and she enjoys helping others prosper.

“The satisfaction comes from seeing products finished and you know you’re helping someone’s life. That’s what makes you want to go on to the next building,” she said.

Fisher maintains that a vibrant downtown also can serve to entice potential business and industry to locate here.

“You must grow it,” she said. “It dictates what the economy of the whole county will be. So many judgments are made on a community based on their downtown. It’s critical.”

It’s not just about the present, but the future as well, Fisher said.

“We have more young entrepreneurs who are choosing to stay here. This is our home; we want to make it better,” she said.

“Young people are taking ownership of Marion. We need to pass this on to someone else.”

aconchel@gannett.com

740-375-5107

Twitter: @anthonyconchel