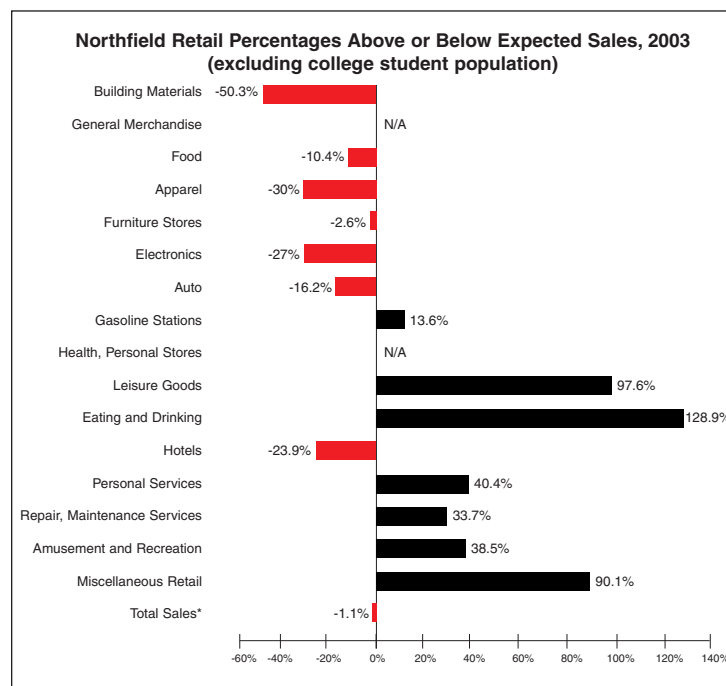
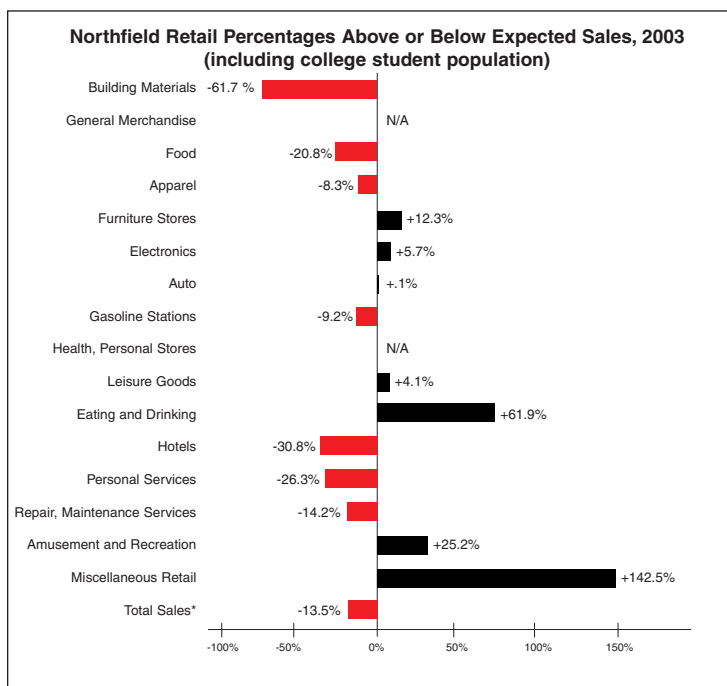
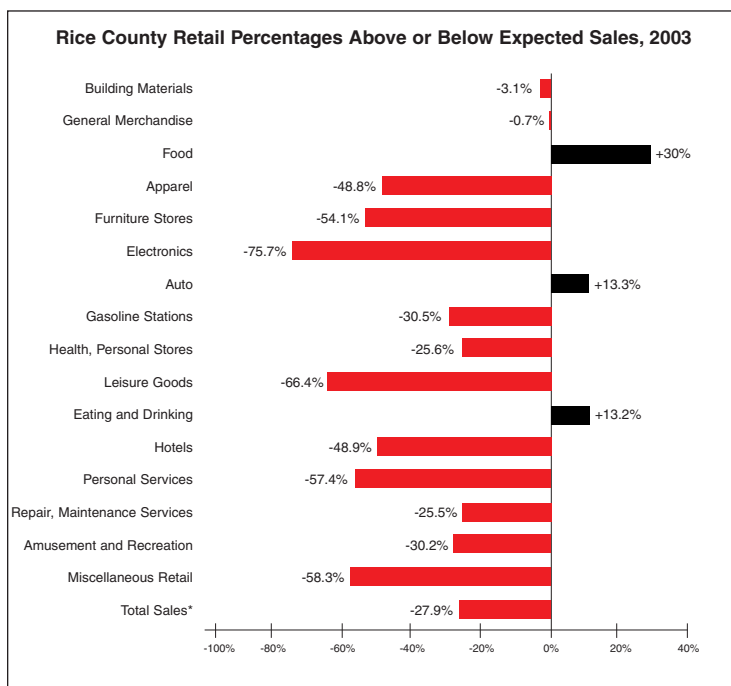


Taking a look at Northfield's retail health



Dan Iverson/Northfield News

Source: University of Minnesota Extension Service

The charts above reflect the percentage amount of Rice County's and Northfield's actual sales and whether they were above or below expectations for 2003. These numbers reflect the strengths and weaknesses shown by these areas when it comes to various retail areas. The zero-percentage mark represents the average that is set according to state levels. This information was presented in a forum on retail health.

By MICHELLE KUBITZ
Staff Writer

NORTHFIELD — A continuation Tuesday of a forum hosted by the Northfield Downtown Development Corporation gave downtown business owners and other stakeholders a chance to talk about the retail health of Northfield.

That's a first step, but Bruce Schwartau, an educator with the University of Minnesota Extension Service also challenged those in attendance to take action.

Last week Schwartau presented a retail trade analysis for Northfield, sponsored by the NDDC, First National Bank and the *Northfield News*. This week he came back to the NDDC to continue the discussion and take a more in depth look at the numbers that make up Northfield's retail health.

In a nutshell, Northfield's

retail health is "fairly decent," Schwartau said, presenting numbers that reflected Northfield's population with and without the presence of the 5,000 college students who live in the city on a part-time basis.

The strongest areas the city has for its retail health are miscellaneous retail, eating and drinking and its auto industry.

Schwartau presented these figures by calculating the city's "pull factor" which "measures the size of a city or county's trade area" by dividing a city's sales per capita by the state's sales per capita.

Whereas the downtown needs to build on its strengths, there are also opportunities for retailers to explore.

For instance, what percentage of the builders who are construction residential units in our area working with local retailers?

Robert Bierman, the owner

of Bierman Furniture, pointed out that in some cases it is up to the retailer to seek out business from these contractors.

"It's up to the businesses to promote themselves to these builders," he said.

The key to retail health, though, is not simply looking at ways to attract outsiders to shop in Northfield's downtown. Northfield needs Northfielders shopping in its downtown.

Ross Currier, executive director of the NDDC, cited a recent article promoting a "buy local" movement that a handful of small cities in Minnesota have been implementing.

"For every \$100 that's spent locally, four times as much of that money stays in town rather than if you spend it at a chain store," he said.

A local campaign to encourage people to shop locally "is definitely something worth looking into," he said.

In the same token, local retailers need to assess what their customers want.

Warren Ringlien brought up the lack of hobby stores in Northfield, as well as the lack of quality and the high price that he has found while shopping for certain items.

"How far would a person drive to save 10 bucks," he said.

Another facet that retailers need to tap into are the city's college students. Not only do the colleges help enhance Northfield's reputation as an arts town, these students "have mothers and fathers," Schwartau said.

"They're here shortly before Christmas, shortly before Mother's Day ... How well are you drawing in their purchases that they are going to be making for their parents," he said.

Schwartau emphasized the need for retailers to communicate with each other, as well as

organizations like the NDDC and the Northfield Area Chamber of Commerce.

Krin Finger, owner of The Rare Pair, hoped that Schwartau's presentation would prompt some discussions and consideration for retailers in the downtown.

Although Finger had wanted additional information on strategies that small businesses could utilize, "I did take some pull factor knowledge and how it's relevant to Northfield," she said.

One of the things Finger thinks would help retail health in downtown is "consistent hours.

"... I'm not just saying you have to be open ... pick what work schedule works for your business and stick with it," she said.

One of the points that Schwartau made in his presentation was that businesses

should consider the hours kept by their town's residents.

With several locals commuting to the Twin Cities, keeping local businesses open later to accommodate their schedules might be an option, he said.

Another thing Finger thinks businesses should keep in mind is a "good focus on what your store is," she said.

"Although we'd like to be everything to everyone, that type doesn't succeed unless you are a Jacobson's department store," she said, referring to the downtown business that closed its doors last year.

"Stick with that niche that works for you. Stay focused," she said.

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