

Seeking and growing healthy retail growth

Tuesday's Downtown Forum, "Retail Trade Analysis of Northfield and Rice County" sponsored by the Northfield Downtown Development Corporation, the Northfield News and 1st National Bank of Northfield, was a lively affair. The 56 participants that gathered in the Riverview Conference Room at the Archer House listened intently to the presentation and then asked probing questions about the numerous charts and graphs.



Ross Currier
Guest columnist

I'm more of a map man than a graph guy, so I wasn't quite as cranked up about the PowerPoint presentation as many of the attendees. I was, however, greatly encouraged that so many in the group seemed motivated by the data into taking action.

The headline in the

Northfield News said something like "Local retail sales decline". Well, yeah...a little. After 10 years of steady annual increases from 1990 to 2000, total sales look like they have declined slightly over the past three-year period of collected data. It appears that we're back to 2000 levels.

It's not good news, to be sure, but it's not quite a disaster. It's certainly something that merits further consideration and, even more important, action.

The next step in the analysis by Bruce Schwartau of the University of Minnesota Extension Service was to study the retail sales by business categories. He compares Northfield to a state average for each category.

Of the 14 categories studied for Northfield, we're above average in seven and below average in seven. In fact, for folks in some categories, business is good, but for folks in other categories, business is not so good.

Bruce summarized these findings by saying, "Most communities in Greater Minnesota would kill for this graph." Meaning, sure, it could be better...it could also be a lot worse.

But heck, disasters help sell

newspapers and maybe crises motivate people to action. So, certainly, there's lots of room for improvement and, sure, there's work to be done. Why not work for on-going improvement?

The Extension Service's methodology for finding the state average in each category is to calculate the anticipated spending based on household income. If Northfield's sales in a particular category are above the state average, we're "pulling" sales from other areas. If sales in a particular category are below the state average, we're "leaking" sales.

There was some sentiment at Tuesday's gathering that we may be "leaking" sales of building materials to Dundas and consumer electronics to Burnsville. For some retailers, the biggest leak of all is the Internet.

But enough with all this pulling and leaking, what does this mean to me? The theme of the NDDC's Forum and Bruce's presentation was "Healthy Retail = Healthy Community." So, if you're part of this community, it's in your interest that the retail be healthy.

So, what can we do to increase the health of our retail community? Well, there are two

easy answers. First, get the folks that live in Northfield to spend more of their retail dollars in Northfield (thus reducing the "leaking"). Second, get more of the folks that don't live here to come visit for some of that unique Northfield retail experience (thus increasing the "pulling").

Those are the two easy answers. The tough part is figuring out the steps that we as a community need to take to achieve these goals.

As Bruce was quoted in Wednesday's article, "The answers are really out here (gesturing to the audience)...I just want you to start thinking about what you can do to grow retail health."

So please join us, Tuesday, June 14th, 8 a.m. in the Riverview Conference Room of the Archer House, for "Healthy Retail = Healthy Community" Round 2, as Bruce facilitates our next steps toward a healthier retail.

Cookies will be served, ideas will be generated and action will be taken.

— Ross Currier is a Northfield resident.