

# PUNCH

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Empty storefronts, and what some say is the city's belated response to the quiet in the streets, raised questions. Are all the For Rent signs due to the usual suspects, inarguable and therefore safe blames like the economy and the streetscape? Or have some city agencies and policies been damaging or ineffective in other ways?

The Bar Association owners Mark Solomon and Ron Kopko say they've soured on the city because it's done little to effectively help spur business downtown. They point to a long list of defunct shops, bars and eateries.

"Twenty-eight businesses closed in the last 28 months," Solomon said. "I bet even the mayor doesn't know that."

City leaders don't see it that way.

Don Paight, executive director of Fort Myers Redevelopment Agency, said his office has an ongoing record of creating events such as Bike Night to attract crowds; that most businesses close because of personal situations or bad business decisions and the city has gone out of its way to help merchants.

"It's not the city's responsibility to insure someone's private business is a success," he added. "I don't think you'll find any other place in the city, or the county for that matter, where you can come to the city to help with promotions."

As a result of weekly meetings with business owners, Paight said over \$120,000 has been approved by city council for a variety of programs to help out. For example, a tax and insurance subsidy which pays businesses 50 cents per square foot on their property, for every month the streetscape is (or has been) directly blocking their entrance.

But Solomon and Kopko, who ended their dinner service due to lack of business but kept the bar open, said they haven't seen any subsidy yet.

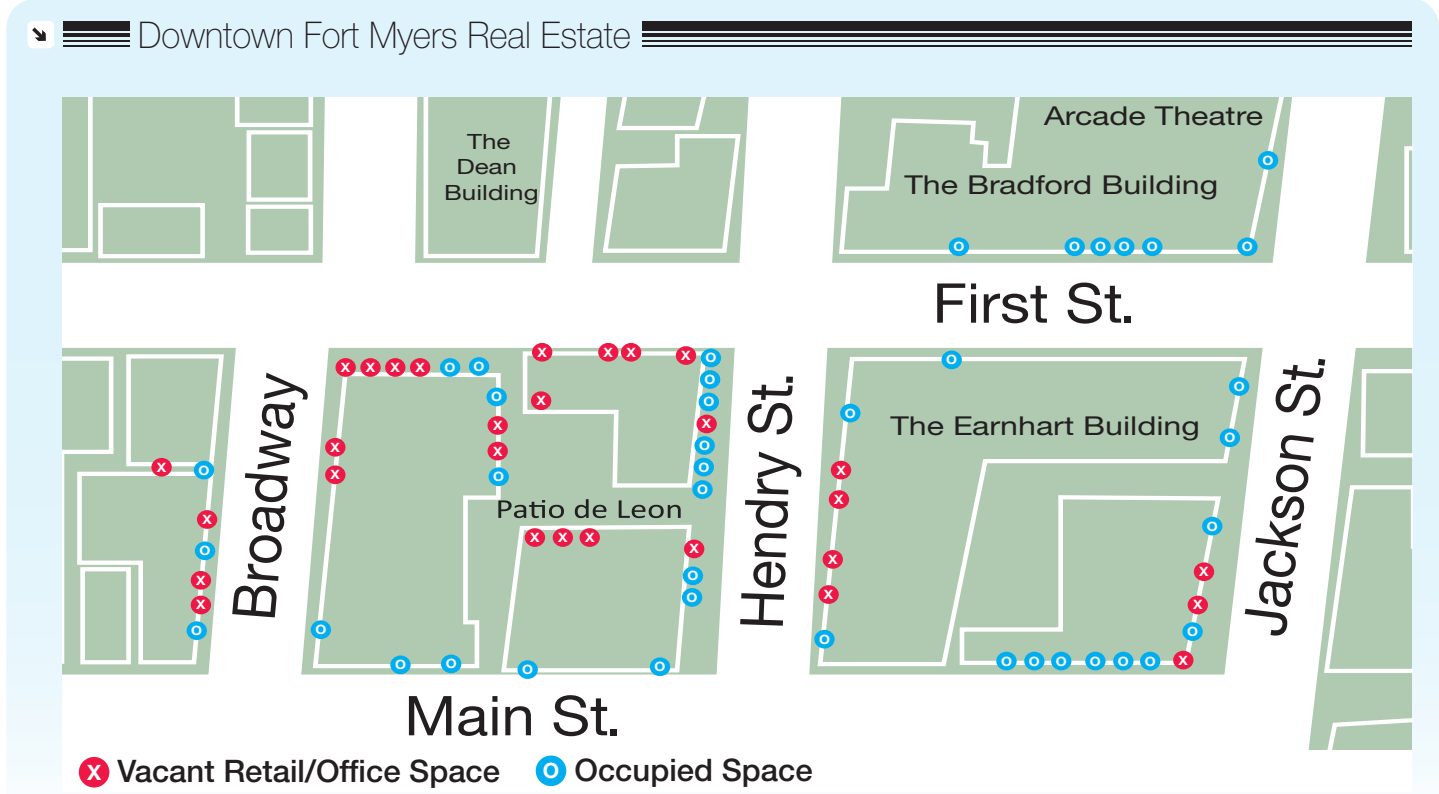
"If I go out of business before they figure it out, will I get a check?" Solomon asked.

Harold Balink, owner of Harold's on Bay and H2, recently filled out his application for the subsidy, and called the programs "fantastic," but added, "I think some of these programs needed to be instituted 10 years ago, or at least before they started the streetscape."

Millions of dollars have been poured into revitalizing downtown since 2003, after well-known New Urbanist city-planner and architect Andres Duany helped produce a master plan for how the city could use its historic charms and unspoiled waterfront to create economic and social vibrancy.

But five years later, nine high rise condos, which the city council approved before the housing bubble burst, aren't filling up. And the green construction fence, which has been moving from block to block, has kept much of downtown's core impassable throughout the height of tourist season. City planners say the \$50 to \$60 million project is estimated to be complete in late 2009. But even after the fence is gone revealing freshly laid bricks - what then?

"This will be a complete ghost town with really nice roads," said Tori Woodall, 28, who lives in the Dean Apartments overlooking First Street. Woodall makes bicycle lunch deliveries for Wise Guys Subs & Stuff on First Street and said her tips have dwindled from an average of \$20 per day to about \$7.



Many retail spaces are empty in the downtown River District such as these on First Street.

## Teenagers in bars

City councilman Warren Wright said the slowdown began six years ago when the city maimed downtown nightlife by banning 18 to 21 year olds from bars.

"Eighteen to 25 year olds travel in packs and they wanna go somewhere with their friends," he said. "If half your friends can't go in, they go somewhere else. It's legal in the state of Florida to be 18 and go into a bar; they just don't allow it downtown."

Wright argued that if an 18 year old can go to war, they should be able to go to nightclubs as well (even if they aren't allowed to drink).

Jim Suttle, a city councilman in Omaha, Neb. has been working to let kids into some bars there, provided they're there for live music. He said it might be time to change the way we think of that age group. "I think we need to begin to change our ordinance to fit the times, and fit what our society is. It's changing and these are issues we're still struggling with."

Fort Myers Police Department spokeswoman Shelly Flynn said allowing 18 to 21 year olds in bars was a hassle for officers. "Before the ordinance was put in place it did cause a lot of problems - fights, unruly behavior. It was a drain on resources to other parts of the city."

"Their feeling was that things were too rowdy, they were finding beer bottles on the street and the police were saying there were too many fights," Wright said. "You can't blame all that on the 18 year olds. The fact of the matter is that was the one industry that was thriving downtown - the bar scene - and through legislation we've gutted that."

Space 39 Art Gallery owner Terry Tinch supports letting kids in bars, gesturing towards an empty Patio de Leon

outside his gallery, saying "There's nobody down here, the economy is for (canned ham), and this is going to go on for at least another two or three years... Anything just to get people down here would be good. It's going to get a whole lot quieter before it gets better."

Paight said he would not have wanted his daughter going to bars at 18 and Solomon said there's very little for kids to purchase, since alcohol is the primary late night offering. Councilman Simms acknowledged there's not a place for kids to hang out downtown, period, but their business is needed.

"We all know who has the spendable cash," Simms said. "That's teenagers. You need that entity in the downtown area for businesses to survive."

Wright also said the Harborside Event Center, a 42,000 square foot convention hall on prime river property, that costs about \$1.2 million per year to operate, is money that could be better spent; and that the preponderance of high rise towers versus middle income housing, have all contributed to the area being little more than a "business park."

"It can't just be for rich people who live in high rise condos," Wright said. "It has to be for the 18 year olds, for the seniors. It has to be for everyone."

## Harborside

At a recent city council meeting, a debate flared when Harborside general manager Rose Rundle asked the city council to make only positive statements about the event center, which is making plans for expansion to almost double the size.

"Let's just stick to one game plan," she said.

Fort Myers mayor Jim Humphrey, who called Rundle's management of the facility "miraculous," had asked her to be there so the city council could end rumors that the building might be sold.

"So the paper can print, 'That build-

ing is not for sale," Humphrey said.

The worries were based on a March 21 story in The News-Press that showed a photograph of the event center along with a story about city property that might be sold. But Wright feels that would make better sense economically.

"You can not put a gag on me, Rose," he said, peeved. "I'm not speaking negatively when I'm trying to talk about the reality of the economics."

Rundle notes that Harborside brings an estimated 350,000 people to downtown every year for events like the boat show, the senior expo or job fairs.

"Personally, I think the only thing that's holding Harborside back is there's no hotels by it," said John Good, president of Good Event Management, who runs the boat show.

However, Rundle did admit that only about 10 percent of the event center's business comes from out-of-town. That means that locals may be going to events downtown but they likely return home without shopping or dining. There are few out-of-town business or convention travelers who need to use downtown services.

Rundle holds that a planned expansion of Harborside would allow it to get bigger, out-of-town conventions as well. But without downtown hotel rooms, that may be unlikely.

Wright said that is "a vision that will never become a reality," and South Fort Myers can fill the role Rundle and other city leaders see Harborside playing.

"I see three hotels going up at Alico Road, two going up at the Forum, a huge complex going up at the airport with a 10,000 square foot meeting space," he said. "The entire migration is going south."

## Walk of Shame

A picture of a sinking ship symbolizes downtown Fort Myers on The Bar Associations recent flyer, promoting an event called "Fort Myers Walk of Shame," a guided tour of downtown's defunct businesses. Last Wednesday at 6 p.m., Kopko and Solomon invited patrons to take the tour and return to the bar afterwards for happy hour over a discussion of why the River District might be "The new Atlantis."

"What happened?" the flyer asks. "Was it an old Mayan curse? Bad planning? Apathy?"

Just after 5 p.m. that day, a Fort Myers Police Officer went there to check out what was going on.

"The Lieutenant, they just get nervous," he said.

But there was no reason to be nervous because only 73 year-old Bob Gibson showed up. He moved to Fort Myers in



PAIGHT



WRIGHT



BALINK

FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO