

1973 and became a "Friend of Downtown" in 1991 for \$30, when his family bought him an inscribed brick outside Harborside Event Center, shortly after it was built.

"I've been waiting for something to go on in downtown for a long time," Gibson, said. "It was a going city in the mid 1970s..."

"It's not like the baseball field in 'Field of Dreams,' build it and they will come. They're building it here, but no one's showing up yet."

A senior reporter for Wink News, Mike Walcher, was there to cover the Walk, which was canceled due to poor attendance. He's been reporting on downtown for years. Walcher said the streetscape is "a disaster for downtown merchants - we get the emails, we get the calls."

He's seen a lot of merchants come and go - and remembered one recent going in particular. "Those people came in with incredible hopes and dreams and they left so angry, we couldn't even interview them anymore."

Walker said Indigo Room owner Raymond Aulen learned years ago that the city can only help so much. "He's always said you've gotta make it on your own."

Kopko and Solomon said they didn't find the camaraderie in Fort Myers they would have expected. "It's just a shame because I moved to Fort Myers, opened a business here and I was the only one who was excited."

Kopko is an interior designer who undertook a complete renovation of that building, its courtyard and the space across from it when he opened in 2006 as a restaurant and lounge. Then, he championed downtown. That romance started its "downward spiral" in 2007 when the city told him he'd have to wait a year to get the plumbing in his bath-

rooms fixed - until the streetscape was scheduled to dig up the pipes. So his option was to not have bathrooms or pay thousands to install a "lift system" to carry the sewage elsewhere.

The city's first suggestion, Kopko said, was that he put in a men and women's porta potty during that year.

After negotiations, the owner of the building ended up sharing the cost of the lift system, about \$15,000, with the city.

And Kopko said city planners and others have decided to take a passive role during what they consider an inevitable slowdown for businesses.

"I'm used to, when it gets tough you fight harder," he said. "And that's not the train of thought down here, instead it's when it gets tough, you wait it out."

Paight said there are other programs being instituted to help businesses.

Starting May 9, "Friday Night Live" will bring live music to the Patio De Leon.

Kids Construction Day will take place on Saturday, May 3 from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. along First Street and Hendry Street. Construction vehicles will sit dormant that day and kids will be given hard hats and get to play on the equipment.

The FMRA put aside \$12,000 to make business owners storefronts more attractive by dressing them up with potted plants. Paight said an out of town company will visit owners soon, and if they would like, install the plants and care for them.

He also said the FMRA will sponsor any group of downtown businesses who want to have their own street parties.

"Any business, if they have an idea and want to go in with other businesses on a street, we'll help with it," Paight said. ■

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