

POTENTIAL

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this area is unique. And I have some great customers. It'll eventually get there. I'm just committed to the area at this point."

But Routhier is still frustrated by a stigma of failure in downtown. Sometimes customers make a purchase just as a favor, she said.

Despite those attitudes, there are signs of improvement.

"There is a lot of foot traffic here on a busy weekday during lunch," she said. "More so than if you were at a strip mall in Cape Coral."

City manager William Mitchell said the problems aren't all unique to Fort Myers.

"The recession can't be good for downtown businesses and merchants any more than it's good for any business people or any economy," he said. "With an improvement in the overall national and state economy, there's every reason to be optimistic about downtown Fort Myers' future as a center of business and economic activity."

Others said things aren't so dire. At April's Eatery on First Street, where owners Kitty Tyler and Cliff Dodd have served breakfast, lunch and homemade pie for more than 14 years, business is good. The married couple won't even feel pressed to open extra hours during ArtFest this year — a downtown event that brings in weekend business — because the crowds during regular lunch hours has kept them going.

"In the old days, when it was right out here on First Street, we were asked to be open," Tyler said. "Downtown is much healthier now. For all the negatives of people saying downtown is slow, it's a lot healthier than it was 14 years ago."



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

Bay Street, like downtown's economy, still needs some repair. "If I wasn't driving a cab I'd be lost around here now," said veteran taxi driver Ike Morse. "There's a lot of changes, no doubt about that."

For Routhier, events like ArtFest and Bike Night have made the difference in her staying.

"Now we're facing a recession, we're facing hard times, and little things like this make a big difference," she said. "If (city planners) want this area to succeed, every bit helps in the big scheme."

Steven Stage, a downtown Fort Myers resident who has lived in Florida for a quarter-century, said it's just a matter of time before those high rise buildings are filled and downtown's rising potential emerges.

"(Developers) may have been a little premature, but it'll all come back," he said. "Developers have deep enough pockets. They'll wait it out."

Stage's work as a building contractor, representing the owner of a residential project, recently led him to Georgia.

"I have to go where the work is," he said. "And when I complain to my contractor brethren, their resounding reply is 'At least you have work.'"

Ike Morse, who has driven a taxi in Fort Myers for more than 20 years, said downtown has evolved beyond recognition.

"If I wasn't driving a cab I'd be lost around here now," he said. "There's a lot

of changes, no doubt about that."

Terri Hendricks, who has worked in the offices at The Dean apartment building for eight years, said the growing pains will eventually pay off.

"It's a very slow, painstaking process," she said. "Parking is horrible and getting around is horrible. It'll get better but getting through it is very tiresome."

While some local business owners have found ways to overcome the construction, recession and slow summer, others are worried they might not make it.

For Ichiban, a Japanese/Chinese eatery on Broadway Street, the streetscape project reached their doors during what is traditionally the busy winter season. The restaurant's main entrance may now only be accessed by a temporary metal walkway construction crews installed.

"It used to be slow in the offseason, but I still had five or six tables and some takeout," owner Hoe Chong said. "But now takeout is zero."

Chong said business has dropped 40 percent from this time last year, and not only customers, but also delivery drivers, have trouble finding his doors.

"You wouldn't even believe I was open right now," he said. "We haven't had one table tonight."

Chong said he was forced to lay off kitchen workers and cut everyone's hours; he sometimes turns off the air conditioning or closes early if no one comes in.

"If this thing is going to be prolonged more than six months, we won't have a future," said Ichiban server and Chong's brother Sing Chong.

City planners said construction on any given street takes about four months, but weather or setbacks replacing buried, long-outdated utilities can slow things down.

"What has been going on under the ground for the last 50 years has not always been well documented," said Kaye Molnar, a spokesperson for the city. "What you find when you get under the ground is not always what you expected."

Molnar, with the public consulting firm Cella, Molnar & Associates, said she is helping the city handle various issues related to construction like getting deliveries to the right spot and making sure the garbage is picked up.

"There's never a good time for maintenance and updating your streets and your infrastructure," city councilman Warren Wright said. "It's essentially 60 years of neglect of the infrastructure and it had to be done, but it's been a very painful process to be sure. We're probably about 18 months away from having everything in place. I think that not only can it work, but it can thrive. I want to make downtown fun again, and make it more inclusive, for everybody."

In spite of Ichiban's blocked entryway, two older ladies found their way into the otherwise empty dining room for a pre-theatre meal one evening last week. It had been a walk for them, clanking down that temporary metal sidewalk.

"We found you," one said to Chong, out of breath. "We drove that way and this way and we finally found a place to park." ■

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