

Importance of shopping locally

Editorial

Cities and towns often are judged by their downtowns. Lancaster is as good an example as any.

Today, Lancaster's downtown is the envy of similar-sized towns (if not towns of all sizes).

This is largely due to an economic resurgence that began in the late 1990s during the administration of then-Mayor Charlie Smithgall, one that largely continues today under Mayor Rick Gray.

Along with Central Market and the downtown convention center/hotel -- two downtown jewels -- the area has added several retail shops and restaurants in recent years. There is a thriving arts corridor. Customer traffic, particularly on "First Fridays," is robust.

Lancaster has been fortunate. Other Lancaster County communities, not so much. People in those communities either don't have, are unaware of, or don't fully appreciate their downtowns. As a result, many are fighting decline.

So, it is encouraging that the Lancaster County Downtown Consortium -- which comprises the downtowns of Elizabethtown, Mount Joy, Manheim, Lititz and Ephrata -- is trying to do something about it.

This month, the consortium sponsored "Shop Downtown Days," an online shopping event that offered "Buy Local" cash certificates that were worth double the initial value when redeemed over multiple visits to participating downtown businesses.

A key component of the promotion is the multiple visits, which bring more people

downtown more often. This is good for business, and it helps to nurture lasting relationships between merchants and their customers.

The consortium contracted with Cogster (www.cogster.com), which has implemented the promotion in a number of communities.

"We really believe in preserving downtown communities, and think there are some smart ways to harness new technology to do that," says Steve Bisbee, of Cogster.

"If we can raise awareness of some great local spots and encourage people to get back into the habit of going downtown more often, we can help make an impact."

Bisbee says Shop Downtown Days is expected to add thousands of dollars to the economy of the five participating communities here.

Just as importantly, such promotions can result in more people shopping downtown more often.

When that happens, merchants prosper and are more willing to invest in their properties and possibly create jobs. This benefits not just the downtown, but the entire community.

Lancaster knows this all too well.

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