

Revitalization work rolling in Kendallville

Kendallville is on the path. Compared to 2015 when I first arrived in the city to start work here at The News Sun, Kendallville has made some serious leaps and bounds when it comes to its goal of long-range downtown revitalization. Other communities should be taking note and following suit. This past week I worked on two stories that reinforced to me how far the city has come.



THE GARBACZ DUMP
Steve Garbacz

First, I caught up with a downtown building owner who just purchased a building that has been sitting vacant for nearly 20 years. Second, Kendallville has officially hired a full-time Main Street manager who is going to start Jan. 10. On the first point, the Relaxation Station building at 101 N. Main St. was a notorious domino to topple, one that anyone who has been in the city for any amount of time is probably familiar with. It's one that I've been able to enjoy especially for the past five and a half years because it sits right across Main Street from the KPC office here in downtown. In my story discussing with new owner Carla Lowe about her plans for the long, long, long-vacant building, I don't think I was adequately able to capture how excited she was just from the prospect of taking the junky old Relaxation Station off the front of the building and finding the "Citizens National Bank" etched underneath.

Carla, who owns an antique shop down the block on South Main Street, is one of the downtown building owners who has definitely bought in to the city's revitalization and restoration plans. Some people may look at the old Relaxation Station and think it's crazy to take that on, but with the backing of the city's \$2 million Preserving Main Street grant, it's obvious that Carla smells opportunity and is striking at precisely the right time. With only a 15% matching requirement to access grant dollars and with that facade grant intimately tailored to historic preservation, rehabbing the long-vacant building that was once a Great Depression-era bank is *exactly* the type of thing this new program was created to do.

Whether the idea to make the building into a brewpub eventually pans out is irrelevant, although if it works out that would be a huge win for downtown too. Regardless, a downtown building that's been empty and absent for nearly *two decades* is now back in the mix.

That doesn't happen just because. It happens because Kendallville is making it happen. As for the second point, getting to the point of needing a Main Street manager is further proof that Kendallville has made great strides on its downtown.

You don't need anyone working traffic in the downtown if there's no traffic. But as we've seen the last few years, there's been enough happening that the job can't simply be an unpaid de-facto add-on to the chamber of commerce director as it has been prior to now. What Kendallville will have to start 2022 that it didn't have before is a dedicated person to connect downtown building owners with resources like information about facade grants, help organize and manage events, assist in working on construction design, steward these time-consuming state grants and, of course, take the lead on applying for future grants to benefit the downtown. When faced with the fork in the road between continuing to lead the chamber or pursue the new downtown manager job, Kristen Johnson chose the downtown, stating that's really where her passion is. And that's the type of person who's perfect for a job like this, someone who is fully invested and faithful that, yes, a downtown in a small town like Kendallville can be modernized and can be vibrant and can be successful.

Which brings me to my final point — other communities in our area should be taking note and following Kendallville's lead. Downtown revitalization is a process. It's not going to happen overnight.

Look how many times Kendallville had to try — and fail (to the point that it was starting to get depressing) — to get its \$600,000 street-scape grant that helped kick off this flurry of opportunity over the last two years. The key takeaway, however, was that Kendallville wasn't going to take no for an answer, no matter how many times OCRA said it.

Meanwhile, the redevelopment commission was working slow and steady behind the scenes doing 50/50 facade grants to start the tinder and get some of the improvements going. Previously the city would budget \$40,000 for facade grants and not hit that ceiling in a year. More recently they had to go to \$60,000 per year, before hitting closer to \$100,000 this year. That's verifiable momentum that's been building year-to-year, no arguing it.

Kendallville has been deliberate and unflinching in its pursuit of its downtown goals. And whiners whine that "Why are we wasting this money, there's nothing downtown," but my response is, just wait.

That transformation doesn't happen overnight. But as the city keeps driving ahead on its physical improvements, you're going to see the culture improve over time too.

It's already happening. Did we not just talk about the 20-year-empty Relaxation Station turning over?

Hundreds of people showed up to the Fairy, Gnome and Troll Festival, Food Truck Friday and the Kendallville Christmas parade this year. Those first two events didn't even *exist* here prior to 2019.

Kendallville's leaders are driving this change and driving it hard. We're coming up on our next municipal election in two years and I've heard some speculation (as well as some more concrete commitments) about whether some of the city's veteran leaders are going to seek re-election.

If they do, it's hard to argue that the city should change gears right now. If they don't, it'll be a passing-of-the-torch moment and new leaders need to jump into this fast-moving car and be ready to steer right away.

I've seen this movie before in Franklin, Indiana, and it had a good ending — although ending isn't really the right word because that central Indiana city is still growing, still improving even today after making leaps from where it was when I first arrived there in 2013.

And now, Kendallville's the one that's got it going on. It's not there quite yet and naysayers will keep complaining, but just hold on. Keep watching. Other communities, take note.

This city's poised to soon leave other northeast Indiana small towns in its dust.

STEVE GARBACZ is executive editor of KPC Media Group and editor of The News Sun. Downtown is already vastly improved compared to what it was in May 2015 when he first arrived. Email him at sgarbacz@kpcmedia.com.



Letters to the Editor

Some facts are unnecessary, insensitive

To the editor:
I'd like to express a concern I have in regards to the KPC article released recently about the arrest of Steven Restamayer for the murder of Daniel Sheets. Daniel Sheets is my nephew. I love him. Over the last several months since his shocking death, I have cried and consoled with his mother, who is my younger sister. We both have lost our oldest child; mine to cancer, hers to murder. The depth of grief that comes with the loss of a child is unfathomable, no matter how it happens or what the circumstances

are of that child's life. Of course, our family wants justice for Danny and we are hopeful that this case may be getting closer to being resolved. Facts are important to journalism. Unnecessary facts are not. It was insensitive, inappropriate and unprofessional of the reporter to include in the article the descriptions and details of Danny's discovered body. Such reporting is distasteful and leaves emotional scars on the family of victims. In the future, please think twice, then check and edit when reporting facts about a victim who was loved by many.

Carol Karst-Wasson
Angola

Letter Policy

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Welcome to the \$1.25 Store

I'm not an economist, so I can't delve too deeply into the intricacies of today's inflation.

But I think I'm as qualified as most people who write about economics in that I can talk about Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations" all day long without having actually read it.

And I do know a thing or two about dollar stores and dime stores. A lot of consumers reportedly freaked out — were "aghast," as one writer put it — recently when the Dollar Tree chain announced it was upping the price on most items to \$1.25, a 25 percent across-the-board increase.

"Dollar and a quarter store doesn't have the same ring to it," one columnist quipped. And Consumer Reports was prompted to issue a list of suggestions for dollar store shoppers, such as "Your options on each item could be pretty limited" and "Not many carry fresh fruits and vegetables."

What? You mean I can't just stroll into a dollar store with my meticulously crafted list and satisfy all my shopping needs?

All I can say to those aghast consumers is, welcome to my world.

I grew up in a time and place where those of limited means who weren't desperate enough to shop at the Salvation Army went to a place called the dime store. It was technically a five-and-dime store, but nobody called it that.

Even as a 10-year-old clutching my sweaty change, I was smart enough to realize there were a lot of items in that store costing more than a dime. It never occurred to me to wonder why it wasn't called the 19-cent store or the two-bit store.

What ended up as a nationwide phenomenon had begun on Feb. 27, 1879, when Frank Woolworth opened his Great Five Cent Store in Utica, New York. Yes, five cents for anything in the store, from candy and baseballs and drinking cups to writing books and fire shovels and purses, until the stores morphed into the five-and-tens, which had to finally set a top selling price of 20 cents in the 1930s.

That 20-cent limit was abandoned in 1935, which begat Woolworth's, the largest chain in the world for a while.

What we're talking about here is the sort of creeping inflation we can all live with, the sign of a healthy economy humming along, small increases in prices and wages that are so incremental over time we hardly notice until we read a story about decades past and mutter, "Dollar sure went a lot further back then."

What we're facing now, though, is Sudden Onslaught Inflation of the kind we haven't seen in about 40 years, drastic price increases that sweep like a tornado through a trailer park. We feel it at the gas station and the grocery store as we wonder how far the next paycheck will go. Today, we have to look back just weeks rather than decades to lament the reach of a dollar.

It's the kind of inflation even conservatives don't

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quite trust to Adam Smith's "invisible hand" of people acting in their own self-interest in a laissez faire economy. It's inflation that screams for government attention.

But it can be hard to move the government, especially when the message should be, quit doing so much harm.

We can accept that truly free markets aren't possible without government establishing guidelines so we all know we're playing by the same rules, things such as a currency and monetary policy to move on from bartering, enabling and enforcing contracts, trying to frustrate the destructive power of monopolies. But we should be afraid when it moves beyond umpiring the level playing field.

Contrary to popular belief, Smith saw the biggest threat of government not so much in its attempt to intervene in free markets, but to capture them. He detested mercantilism, the collusion of governments and big business to control the flow of goods and services to the point where individuals had no meaningful choices. Central planning does not work, whether foisted on us by governments, a monopolistic merchant class or a combination of both.

We can only imagine how aghast Smith would be at the cozy relationship of Washington and Big Tech to control everything from what goods we can buy to what information we can see. And what would he make of the emerging economy in which, thanks to lobbying and generous campaign donations, we will buy everything from Amazon except a few trinkets still available at the dollar store?

And since he would have known that inflation is basically too many dollars chasing too few goods, we can be pretty sure he would recognize the federal government's pernicious role. We can't blame it for the shortage of goods (except, perhaps, for being asleep at the switch while the supply chain crashed and burned), but it is front and center in responsibility for the flood of dollars.

The Build Back Better plan to dump a few trillion more into the economy seems dead for now, but there are trillions already in the pipeline. We were treated last week to stories about all the glorious plans for spending the money in Indiana — \$50 million each for the Fort Wayne area, the South Bend area, the Indianapolis area ...

Oh, boy, can't wait for the effects to kick in. I have my sweaty change ready for next month's trip to the \$5 store.

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