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JAN 30 2023

To the Douglas City Council and the Douglas DDA,

Over 20 years ago, the Douglas DDA was formed to try and resurrect the dying Douglas downtown. Anyone who was here then can tell you what I mean by that, so I won't go into detail about it here. But back then, a handful of individuals took a chance on resurrecting the downtown. I was one of them, and I am still here and committed to being here.

Early on, we had great success. Our turnaround was written up in the media; some businesses won regional awards and people were talking about the "Douglas Renaissance". Local TV stations even started referring to our area as "Saugatuck Douglas," which was concrete evidence of what was happening. It was our downtown that helped put Douglas on the map!

But, as time went on, we encountered several bumps in the road; the whole downtown was torn up for months for infrastructure improvements, we weathered multiple recessions like 2007, we also lived through the impact of 9/11, and of course COVID. Those things have taken a toll. As a result, I am now the longest surviving retailer from those early days and I have compiled a long list of fellow business owners who have thrown in the towel out of economic necessity. It has not been easy! And it will not be any easier going forward.

In fact, today we face the greatest threat to the survival of our downtown that I have seen. Like so many other brick and mortar business districts around the world, our existence is threatened by multiple changes in our culture, technology and behavior patterns of the customers we rely upon in order to stay in business and keep our downtown viable.

Each of us who own businesses has to find our own solutions to those challenges. And those solutions will vary depending on the type of business we own.

Many things are beyond our control and we need to understand which ones are. Most of them are also beyond the ability of the Council and the DDA to effect.

But there is one very specific thing that you can help with and that is the signage for downtown and its potential to drive more traffic to our businesses. It is not the "sign" that is important, it is the "purpose" of the sign that is important. And unfortunately that has been lost in all of the debates about the sign FOR YEARS and has resulted in immeasurable lost opportunity for our business community during this dragged out process.

If you have been on the Council or the DDA for any length of time, you know that I have addressed this issue in person, by zoom, through multiple letters on the subject, and at focus groups on this topic. Mostly to little or no avail.

But, here I am again because I refuse to give up on Douglas' potential and future.

First, let me repeat why this topic is so critical to the survival of our downtown.

To begin with, let me remind everyone why the DDA was formed. It was formed because it had been proven that small town business districts were dying everywhere and that their survival would ONLY happen if they were given the attention and support of government to do things that individual businesses were incapable of doing by themselves.

And a perfect example is the sign for our downtown at the corner of Center and Blue Star. That sign is owned and controlled by our city government. We, as business owners can't do anything with that critical piece of infrastructure without your permission and approval. So we are at your mercy when it comes to using that tool to get people downtown to our businesses. Period!

Yes, we can take out ads in the paper. We can even pay for billboards on the highway. But the single most effective means of getting people downtown, is by having an "effective" sign at Center and Blue Star to convince people to turn when they are at that intersection!

And we need that sign because our downtown is practically invisible to people when they are driving on Blue Star. So much so, that we constantly hear from people who have been coming here for years and who tell us that they never knew we had a downtown.

But, we are at risk of missing out on the full potential of that sign if current plans for signage at that location move forward as envisioned in the concepts that were part of the DDA's packet for it's January 25th meeting. I have been saying this since the early planning stages of the new Douglas signage was shared with people.

My issue is not with things like color, inches, fonts, herons, etc. What I am talking about is that we are missing the mark when it comes to understanding how important that sign is to the survival of our downtown and we are missing "what the sign needs to accomplish."

For starters, people keep referring to the sign at Blue Star and Center as a "gateway" sign (See Rich LaBombard's December 28 message to the DDA, Re: Gateway Signage and Low-Profile Signage Examples). By definition, a "gateway" sign is a sign that denotes boundaries, e.g. "Entering Douglas." But we don't need a gateway sign at that intersection saying DOUGLAS. We do need a much better welcome to Douglas sign than we currently have where you enter town - but not at Center and Blue Star. What we Do Need for downtown is a sign that will ENTICE, MOTIVATE, AND COMPEL people to turn at that corner!

A gateway sign at Center and Blue Star will not motivate anyone! We have had a downtown sign with an arrow for years and that hasn't been enough. A new sign has to be creative, compelling and not just a cookie-cutter sign like the ones being proposed and considered.

In an era when people are buying everything on the internet, we have to give people more of a reason to visit our downtown - because they don't need "downtowns" anymore.

So, I am asking you again to do better. And to urgently come up with a solution that is specifically designed to meet the goals of driving more traffic downtown. Anything less will not help us. And dragging this out for years longer, until the DDA has the funds to build the grandiose "arch" (which is just a different form of a gateway sign) is not the answer either.

From my point of view, this situation deserves the same kind of problem solving and urgency that we saw when the restaurants in town appealed to the Council for special consideration during COVID. Everyone pulled out all of the stops to come up with SOLUTIONS. The focus was on CAN not CAN'T. And it needs to happen in time for this season - not "eventually."

My argument is that this issue deserves special commitment and focus in order to keep our business district alive today. This can't continue to drag on indefinitely. We don't want our downtown to go back to what it was before we created the DDA. Yet, from my perspective, that's what is at stake.

John Thomas,



owner, Mixed Media Gallery
1/29/2023