

Big Box, Little Box

I grew up on Biltmore Street, in the Forest Park neighborhood of Springfield.

My childhood memories are filled with images of B.F. Leader's 5&10¢ store, Work n' Play clothing store, Stein's Kiddies World, the local laundromat, and Stop & Shop supermarket. These were all at the "X," within walking distance of our home.

Like most families in our neighborhood, we had only one car. My father drove to work, and my mother did her errands on foot. One enduring image, in many variations, is etched in my memory: My mother dragging a two-wheeled wire shopping cart down the sidewalks of Dickinson Street, summer or winter, in sun, rain, sleet or snow.

My mother pulled the cart, empty and collapsed, and bouncing wildly over every crack in the sidewalk, to the Stop & Shop to do the shopping for our family. There, she filled it to overflowing with groceries. Pulling the full cart back home, she struggled to ease it over the curb at street crossings without spilling its contents.

She pulled the cart to the laundromat on Belmont Avenue to do the wash, bulging with dirty clothes on the way down. She pulled it back equally full with damp clothes, still smelling of the hot musty air of the laundromat.

Our world barely extended beyond the “X.” My brother and I were dressed in jeans that came from Work n’ Play. My sisters wore dresses that came from a girls’ clothing store on Sumner Avenue. We did our holiday shopping at the 5&10 or Stein’s.

Ours was a world before shopping malls and big-box stores. On occasion, we’d take the bus downtown. A visit to Forbes & Wallace or Steiger’s was an adventure. My brother and I loved exploring the Boy Scout department at Forbes & Wallace. My mother looked for bargains in the closeout department in the basement.

One of my favorite places to go when we ventured downtown was Johnson’s Book Store. It was actually two stores. The front building on Main Street was great fun - new books upstairs and toys and office supplies downstairs. But, the back store was even better – it housed an art department in the basement and the ground floor, and used books upstairs. Just getting to the back store was intriguing – you could walk through a tunnel under the street that separated the two buildings.

All those stores are gone now. Johnson’s was the last hold-out, closing about ten years ago. Nothing is permanent, and some things, like my mother’s shopping cart, are best retired. Sadly though, one of the casualties of the changes has been the loss of the ability to carry on the essential errands of life within most neighborhoods.

Today, we have little choice but to drive to the supermarket or to shop for school clothes. The “X,” like most of the old neighborhoods in Springfield, has lost its core businesses. What remains are convenience stores, pharmacies, pawn shops, restaurants, and service businesses. These are important, but they don’t address the most basic needs of daily living.

Over the past forty years, there has been a dramatic shift in our pattern of living. We've largely abandoned neighborhood stores for the convenience of shopping malls and big-box stores.

Supermarkets have grown ever bigger. The small local markets of my youth – the Serlick's and Abe's – are gone. Fierce competition among regional supermarket chains like Price Chopper, Big Y, Stop & Shop and the now-defunct Pathmark forced small markets ever farther to the fringe of viability.

A lot of the changes in lifestyle pattern have been brought on by competition from national chains. Among the earliest were Sears and J. C. Penney. Then, discount department stores like Two Guys, Grants, K-Mart, and Ames became common. Together, they created pressure that contributed to the demise of downtown cornerstones, Forbes & Wallace and Steiger's. In the cannibalistic world of chain-stores, many of those businesses have fallen victim to incursions by Wal-Mart and Best Buy.

None of these changes are solely the effect of outside forces. In order for any business to thrive, it requires the participation of us, the consumers. In fact, we play the most important role in determining the market options that are available to us. The question is, do we play that role actively or passively? Do we recognize the impact our shopping choices have and apply our influence thoughtfully, or do we just allow ourselves to be carried along by the tide?

Competition is usually a good thing – it keeps prices low and offers options. On the other hand, predatory competition can ultimately destroy those benefits. New big-box stores are most known for that practice. They slash prices, often below cost, playing a game of chicken with the competition.

If the new store can maintain its artificially low prices long enough, it will drive the weakest of its competitors out of business. Rival big box stores can often compete effectively against this strategy by tapping into the resources of the parent corporation. The casualties are usually the locally-owned independents.

If the new store is especially successful in driving out its competition, the consumer loses. With no competition, a retailer has no pressure to keep prices low – it has effectively created a monopoly.

Of course, in these days of Ebay, Amazon, and other online shopping options, no retailer can truly eliminate all competition. Consumers that have resources will always have choices. It's the disadvantaged among us that suffer the most.

The marketplace doesn't reward slackers. A business must compete effectively to survive. If any business, small or large, can't earn patronage by offering a better deal, better service or more convenience, there's no reason to give it unearned support.

On the other hand, there are shades of competitiveness. It may be worthwhile to give up some breadth of selection or to pay a slightly higher price to shop in the local neighborhood, to save a trip cross-town to the mall.

If we ignore our local businesses, they won't survive, regardless of their quality or competitiveness. If our local businesses wither on the vine as we drive past them on the way to their glitzy competitors, we rob ourselves of choice. We also lose something precious – the color and distinctiveness that is a part of every business that doesn't adhere to a corporate policy.

Besides preservation of choice in the marketplace, there are many other good reasons to shop locally-owned businesses. A study commissioned by the Andersonville

Chamber of Commerce in 2004 showed that money spent at locally-owned businesses tended to stay in the community in much higher percentages than money spent at non-local businesses like big-box stores. Andersonville is a neighborhood in Chicago, facing most of the same pressures as the Pioneer Valley.

The study, conducted by Civic Economics of Austin and Chicago, found that 68% of money spent at locally-owned businesses remained in the local economy in purchases of supplies and business services, and in local taxes that support municipal services like schools, police and fire departments. By contrast, 43% of the money spent by customers of a typical non-local business stays in the local economy.

If you do the arithmetic, you'll see that's a 25% difference. An extra 25¢ out of every dollar spent at a locally-owned business stays here.

So, while shopping at local businesses seems on the surface to benefit mostly the business, it's really in the best interests of the community and the consumer too. We all shop the big boxes sometimes – it's hard to resist the convenience, and their prices are often too attractive to turn our backs on. We need to reserve a meaningful portion of our shopping dollars for the little guys, though.

Locally-owned businesses deserve our loyalty, if for no other reason than the fact that we don't want to lose the ability to choose. But there are other great reasons too. Local businesses contribute to the community in less obvious ways that most remotely-owned businesses won't. Their owners join our civic organizations, doing good for the community through them. They support our little leagues, our Boy and Girl Scout troops, the Salvation Army, and many other organizations that make life richer for us and our families, or that care for the less fortunate among us.

The neighborhood commercial centers of my youth are mostly gone. Times change and we have to change with them. We should recognize the part we play in the changes that happen, though, and use our influence to channel the change.

Support your local business community. You'll feel good about it.