

The little boxes preserve independence

By STEVE HAMLIN

Over the past 40 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.

A lot of the changes in lifestyle have been brought on by competition from national chains. The pioneers of mass-marketing included such names as Sears, Roebuck & Co., F. W. Woolworth, 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 most area independent department stores, including Forbes & Wallace and Steiger's in Springfield, and McCallum's in Northampton, where Thornes Marketplace is today. In the cannibalistic world of chain-stores, even many of those discount department stores 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 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 often slash prices, often below cost, playing a game of chicken with the competition. 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.



Guest Column

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.

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. Pioneer Valley Local First lists a number of studies on their website, www.pvlocalfirst.org. Among them is a study of Andersonville, a neighborhood in Chicago, which found that 68 percent 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 percent of the money spent by customers of a typical non-local business stays

in the local economy — 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 ways that can't be calculated in dollars and cents ways that most remotely-owned businesses don'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 Pioneer Valley has changed a lot over the last 40 years. Times change and we have to change with them. But, we should recognize the part we play in the changes that happen, and use our influence thoughtfully to channel the change in a beneficial direction.

The area is blessed with a wealth of local merchants. They are a crucial component of the rich, dynamic zeitgeist of the area that makes it the envy of many other communities, near and far. We take them for granted at our peril.

Steve Hamlin lives in Huntington. He's been a self-employed small business owner for 20 years and has served on business associations, town boards and as a member of the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission.