

Building the new Lockport

A 'destination' downtown, affordable housing and top-notch schools may be the sparks to reignite 14094

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Contributor

The story of Lockport has always been a story about something new being built on top of something old. The history of our community is extraordinary and that history is not just about the past. It has left us with treasures that continue forward into the future because of the people who have lovingly preserved them: the Erie Canal and locks, the Palace theater, the Schoolhouse Wellness Center, and more.

But a new future is being built here as well.

You see it clearly in a vibrant network of young entrepreneurs, who are designing businesses that not only aim to be successful enterprises but to also build us up as community. I love these people and I'm really happy to see some of them profiled in this edition of Lockport magazine.

What is the future Lockport that's being built today? I spoke with an assortment of people who think about the city's future a good deal, from different perspectives. None of them had a crystal ball, but they did have insight.

THE BUSINESS CLIMATE

The business life of Lockport is one of its economic pillars, affecting everything from job and investment opportunities to having cool new places to eat and shop. No one pays more attention to this than Heather Peck, the president and CEO of Greater Lockport Development Corporation (GLDC). That is the public agency that focuses on economic development in the city, from the monumental rebirth underway at Harrison Place, to helping small businesses get a new look.

"I think what we're going to see is a lot more



BENJAMIN JOE / STAFF

Heather Peck, director of planning and development for the City of Lockport, and Grace Platt, Lockport Main Street Inc. program manager, at the Lockport Community Farmers Market on Canal Street. Peck, LMSI's first program manager, launched the weekly market in 2011 to draw more people to the heart of downtown.

people living downtown. There are several development projects that are happening right now that are going to be turning commercial properties into residential properties and that is obviously going to translate into a lot more people living in the downtown district," Peck said. Those conversions include the 82-apartment Harrison Place project, Chase Commons in the old Presbyterian home on High Street, and the planned conversion of the vacant F&M Building at Main and Locust streets.

In theory, more people living downtown

should also mean new businesses downtown. "The two should feed off one another," Peck said.

She sees Canal Street and the restoration of the Flight of Five locks as a model.

"We knew that people were interested in the canal and in canal heritage, but we didn't have any kind of attraction. We didn't have Steamworks, we didn't have Lake Effect. We wanted to create a destination that could attract people to the center of the downtown district. That's really why the community market was started,



BENJAMIN JOE / STAFF

Grace Platt, Lockport Main Street Inc. program manager, and Heather Peck, director of planning and development for the City of Lockport, pose as canallers on Canal Street. Small businesses launched and launching in the Lockport Locks Heritage District — eateries, brewpubs, retail and service establishments, some with an Erie Canal twist — are breathing new life into downtown.

so that it could become a gathering place for the community.”

“My hope is that what we see on Canal Street on Saturdays and what we see on Main Street during Food Fest and Octoberfest is what we are going to see on the weekends, every weekend in downtown,” Peck said.

You can already see a preview of this with new weekend destinations like the Locktender taproom and bottle shop, AJs Hot Dog Stand, B&D’s Bagels and the Big Ditch Brewery on the way soon. “I also think we will be seeing a lot more biking and a lot more walking,” Peck said, “and we are trying to figure out how to make those things happen.”

Grace Platt, the program manager of the non-profit Lockport Main Street Inc., sees tourism and more small business as a key to opening up downtown and the entire city to a better future. “I do think we have a destination.” That increased tourism, she said, will mean new businesses, like restaurants, breweries and small shops. “I see a lot of crafters and artisans come through the Saturday market, and a lot of them can and want to bridge into doing a storefront.”

I asked Peck why Lockportians who do

not live downtown should care about all this development there. In addition to everything else, she said, it’s basic economics. “The more people we have investing here, the more tax dollars come into our community and the more taxes hopefully go down.”

THE HOUSING MARKET

The other pillar of the city’s economy is the housing market. Anyone living here is well aware of three current realities: the price of homes is increasing quickly, local tax assessments are climbing right along with them, and rentals have become more expensive and harder to find. What is behind all of this and how can we keep Lockport an affordable place to live a decade from now?

I spoke with Kathy Sparks DiMillo of Hunt Real Estate who is in a good position to see the trends. “We have families that are losing out in multiple offers in Amherst and Clarence and they’re bringing their families into Lockport,” she said. The rise of home prices in Buffalo’s more affluent suburbs is sending buyers here.

DiMillo also said that some of the demand is driven by something that might surprise people:

“It’s people moving back to Lockport.” Young couples are moving back to raise their children near their families. Grandparents are coming back to be near their grandchildren (the reason my wife and I moved here seven years ago from Bolivia).

Another insight she offered is that our housing market is a creature of the cycle of life, with some bottlenecks in the current market.

One reason for the current high prices is that there just aren’t enough family starter homes on the market. Many of those homes are still occupied by older homeowners who have lived in them for decades and aren’t selling. But DiMillo sees signs of change in two new directions, both driven by the desire of older homeowners to liberate themselves from the burden of lawn care in the summer and snow shoveling in the winter.

For those who want to own, there is a growing demand for “patio homes.” These are one story and all the outside maintenance is handled by a homeowners association. One of those developments (James Francis Estates on Lincoln Avenue) is being constructed by DiMillo’s brother, local builder David Sparks of Sparks



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Lockport City School District superintendent Mathis Calvin III addresses the student body during a district-wide assembly celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month in September 2023.

Custom Homes. “It’s going to be 42 homes. We haven’t even broken ground and I have reservations for 10 already,” DiMillo said.

Other longtime homeowners are interested in giving up ownership altogether. Couples and singles in their 50s and 60s, as well as young professionals without children, are interested in high end apartment living, she said. “They like the walkability and the freedom of renting an apartment.”

This means that the modern apartment developments coming to downtown could become game changers. Several of those old commercial buildings have been vacant for 40 years. The projects will offer more than 200 such units and potentially open up homes for young families, something Lockport needs badly.

GLDC is overseeing a program that offers down-payment help for families here buying their first home, grants up to \$30,000. “I opened it 30 days ago and I already have 30 applications,” Peck said in late August.

But the other thing that Lockport needs badly is more affordable rental housing, and here as well there are signs of progress.

Peck said that new rental housing in the city is aimed at serving three different markets: market rate, workforce and low-income. Market rate is based on what renters are willing to pay. Workforce housing means that the rental units have to be priced at rates that someone earning an average income here can afford.

Low-income housing includes units for people receiving public assistance. Many of the new projects offer a mix of these.

“We want to make sure that housing is affordable in this community for people to live here,” Peck said.

OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

No public agency in our community has a greater responsibility than Lockport City School District, but our schools have been plagued by a series of important challenges: a declining student population, poor test scores, and poor literacy rates. Under the district’s new superintendent, Mathis Calvin III, our schools are getting an important makeover.

Earlier this year the district completed development of a comprehensive five-year plan for improving our schools, led by a committee of more than 55 teachers, students, staff, board members, and community members. Some of that plan aims at the basics. Calvin told me, “Our goal is really taking a good look at reading, writing and arithmetic.” He cited research that showed the urgency of getting student literacy up to grade level by grade three, to prevent a pattern of falling behind. “I want to see a rise with respect to reading, with math,” he said.

That plan also focuses on the whole person that we want our graduates to be as they enter a complex and challenging world.

“We want them to leave being very resilient,

that they’re flexible and they’re adaptable in the face of challenges and setbacks,” Calvin said. “We feel it’s very important to support innovation amongst our student body. We want to make sure that our students are critical thinkers, that they’re problem solvers.”

Another element is making students feel comfortable with the increasing diversity in our schools. “We want them to be able to not only embrace diversity, but embrace diverse perspectives,” the superintendent said.

The plan is also focused on the practical need to prepare students for their working lives after graduation. “We’ll be doing a lot to connect with our colleges and places of business,” Calvin said, “because we really want our kids when they leave to be successful, whether they go on to school or whether they go on to work, wherever they go.”

The district also aims to focus on the deeper challenges faced by a different generation of children growing up in a complex world. “The needs have gone up for our students, especially around areas of social and emotional learning, mental health and support,” Calvin said.

The future of Lockport is being built today. It may not include a monorail over the Erie Canal (though that would be really cool), but it does include some very positive changes being led by some very dedicated people.

Said Grace Platt, “I feel confident that it will be good. My kids are in this town, so I gotta make sure it’s great.”



Jessica Nasca-Dittly, the owner-operator of Terroir General Store on Market Street, chose to locate her business downtown because Lockport is home. "My friends in my community are here, my children go to school here and I want to grow the community where we choose to live," she said.

Ready for the 'next chapter'

Shopkeeper Jessica Dittly trusts she'll succeed as downtown succeeds

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Photos by James Neiss

Most Sunday afternoons, Jessica Nasca-Dittly is behind the counter at Terroir General Store crafting something with a local twist.

As the morning rush for coffee and breakfast food slows to a steady trickle of customers, Nasca-Dittly makes sure to serve up some friendly conversation along with whatever else she's making that day.

"If there's things you need me to start carrying, you just let me know. I'm always leaning into what people want," she tells a customer while ringing up their order.

Nasca-Dittly is on a first-name basis with many of her customers, but she's just as friendly and engaging with strangers who may be entering her store for the first time.

Her friendliness extends to the atmosphere inside her store, which she likens to grandma's kitchen pantry.

"On a good day or a bad day, it's a nice place to land with something good in your belly,"

Nasca-Dittly said.

That pantry is often fully stocked with products from local farmers and food makers, products that Nasca-Dittly uses in almost all of the food items that she makes.

"The food is an avenue to showcase the producers, I'm just like a conduit. I try and do very little to my food, to showcase the people producing or creating the food," she said. "I want to just highlight that and teach people how to use it too."

Firmly entrenched in the Lockport community for more than a decade, Nasca-Dittly said she believes downtown is on the "cusp" of revitalization.

The Youngstown native came to Lockport in 2007 and got a job at Mills Jewelers. In 2013, she decided to go out on her own and opened Cream & Sugar Cafe on East Avenue.

She looks back at those jobs as her "gateway" to really getting to know the community.

"I've always had an affinity for small towns and small business. What I think is really special about Lockport is that it's the perfect scale of a city where you can choose to make a positive impact, and it's recognized," she said.

Nasca-Dittly closed Cream & Sugar after about three years, to focus more on her family, and transitioned to the role of program manager for the not-for-profit organization Lockport Main Street Inc. It's a role she held until 2022.

"Working in the nonprofit world was so different than anything I had experienced. It was a complete learning curve for me in the greatest way," she said. "I saw small business in a completely different light. I saw community in a completely different light. I met and networked with so many people on either side of it. I got to represent the community, and present issues of the community to the city."

While she appreciated the opportunity to understand the community "at a larger scale," Nasca-Dittly eventually had that itch to have her own business, on her own terms, again.

However, she still wanted to have that community focus, and didn't give much consideration to launching that business anywhere but in Lockport.

"There are plenty of other communities that I could have put my store in, but I live here. My friends in my community are here, my children go to school here and I want to grow the com-