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Revival of Lynn's downtown is a work in progress

By **Jill Casey**

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LYNN -- Three religious artifacts peddlers have approached John Olson about renting out his Central Square space to hawk their holy wares, but don't expect the Virgin Mary to appear in the window anytime soon.

Rather than filling 25-27 Central Square, a building that has been vacant for some time, Olson and his partners turned down all three offers.

"If you fill the spaces with the types of stores we've had for 20 years, I really don't think you are doing the community any favors," said Olson, who owns several pieces of property in the area and co-owns Columbia Insurance in Central Square.

Olson and other downtown stakeholders continue to be optimistic about a downtown resurgence, despite several vacant storefronts and word of a condo sale slowdown.

With no shortage of places to grab a sub or a burrito, the desire for a variety of casual bistros or steakhouses remains strong among both old and new Lynners. Olson said many local property owners are courting restaurants, boutiques and even a low-key nightlife spot.

It's not about filling storefronts for the sake of filling empty space anymore, Olson said.

"We are continuing our push to entice the right types of businesses to come to Lynn," said Olson, who also sits on the Chamber of Commerce. "Some of the perceived slowness has to do with the landlords themselves. We have turned away tenants because they just don't fit into our long-term vision."

Dennis Joy of the Mayo Group agrees.

"We're not as anxious anymore," he said. "We're continuing to evolve."

The good news, Olson said, is there continues to be no shortage of lookers interested in Lynn's downtown. Just this week, an established Boston restaurateur, interested in opening not just a local restaurant, but a culinary destination for the North Shore, scouted out 25-27 Central Square.

"It's just a matter of getting them to pull the trigger," Olson said.

In addition, more condos and lofts are on the way, including 22 units above Dunkin' Donuts at 7 Central Square, 10 of which are under contract, 36 units at 40-48 Central Square and 22 artists lofts on Mount Vernon Street.

"Retail always follows residential, never the other way around," said Joy, who is marketing those Central Square units. "I think we've suffered the vagaries of the real estate market, but I am still optimistic the market works in a cycle."

Joy said the proximity to Boston, great beaches and the MBTA still make the city a draw. In his view, it will take another three to four years to see major progress and agrees with Olson, that selectivity is the best route to progress.

Several business plans have flopped in Central Square this year. One man's vision of opening an Italian restaurant on Union Street failed due to a lack of start-up funds, even with seed money from the city's Economic Development and Industrial Corporation. A Russian Book Store closed after less than a year in business as a result of financial woes and although the ice cream shop Big Scoops closed, it is expected to reopen under new owners in the near future.

Peter Deveau, director of city's Economic Development and Industrial Corporation, acknowledged that it might appear that growth has slowed downtown, but pointed to the Dunkin' Donuts on the corner of Union Street and Central Square, The Oxford Street Grill and the Gulu Gulu Café, as three examples of businesses doing well.

"There's a lot of uncertainty out there, even in a good climate," Deveau said. "There is always a bit of attrition when you are starting out."


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