

December 4, 2010

<http://detnews.com/article/20101204/BIZ/12040330>

Detroit retailers push to woo shoppers from malls

*JACLYN TROP**The Detroit News*

Small Detroit retailers are ratcheting up their efforts to compete with suburban malls, big box stores and online retailers as a destination for holiday gifts.

Russell Bazaar, an indoor marketplace of 150 locally owned shops for clothing, accessories and home décor off Interstate 75, is open daily through Jan. 2. It usually is open Friday through Sunday.

Other city stores will be helped by two local nonprofits that plan next Saturday to provide bus tours of downtown and Midtown Detroit to show that boutique shops and other retailers can make up for the lack of national chain stores.

Highlighting Detroit's offerings is important "because these fabulous gems of stores don't have billboards and Super Bowl ads, so people might not know they're there," said Jeanette Pierce, co-founder of Inside Detroit, which is helping sponsor the bus tour.

The shops sell "the type of things you can't get at a mall, and they are always people's favorite gifts," she said.

Hugh — the bachelor pad boutique that opened for six months last year at 2233 Park Ave., next door to Centaur Bar and Town Pump Tavern — has opened its doors for three weeks. GifteD, a shop in the Compuware Building open Fridays through Christmas, features Detroit vendors such as Leopold's Books, Re:View Contemporary gallery and Detroit Wheelhouse.

The Detroit Urban Craft Fair today will sell handmade gifts for crafters and artists at the Fillmore Theatre from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

And in Midtown, the Fisher Building and New Center have about 25 retailers between them — from City Knits to Detroit Gallery of Contemporary Crafts — as well as a full-service post office for mailing gifts and daily lunchtime choir performances.

Bureau of Urban Living and City Bird on West Canfield have extended their hours for the holidays — 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. seven days a week — and tout their personalized service.

"That relationship with the customers is not possible at the big stores," said Emily Linn, co-owner of City Bird, which features merchandise from more than 100 local artists and designers.

The store has already sold out of Michigan-shaped bamboo cutting boards (\$45). Glassware etched with the names of historic neighborhoods, from Belle Isle to Woodbridge, has also been popular (\$36 for a set of two).

Next door, Claire Nelson, owner of Bureau of Urban Living, said she tries to fill her shop with items customers can't find anywhere else. Detroit-themed holiday gifts are selling fast, including a print of the Detroit city flag (\$35), 8 ounces of Motor City blend from the Great Lakes Coffee Roasting Co. (\$7.99) and letter-pressed journals from local artist Don Kilpatrick (\$8), she said.

"We can't compete with the big box retailers or the malls, but most of our customers are the type of shoppers who want to support local businesses and find unique things," Nelson said.

Shopping in Detroit is more difficult than going to a mall but can be worth the effort, said Ed Nakfoor, a Birmingham-based retail consultant.

"A shopper gets the back story of the store, the merchant and the products, and for some people that makes up for any inconvenience," Nakfoor said.

Shoppers should remember smaller retailers may have stricter return policies than the national chains, he said. Since the stores are spread out in the city, customers need to map out locations, he added.

Unlike national retailers, which have avoided southeastern Michigan, independent retailers have taken the chance on opening a business here, said Kees Janeway, a leasing consultant with Stokas Bieri Real Estate, a retail brokerage firm in Detroit.

"It would seem a bit of a civic duty," Janeway said, "to keep your dollars local by rewarding those who have made a commitment to do business here, even in the hardest of times."

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