

Fairport finds a way to liven up village setting

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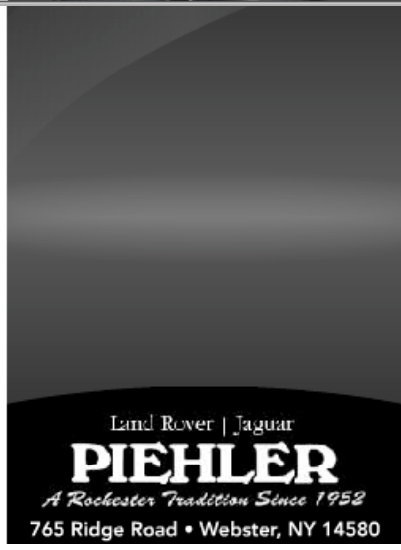
For generations, the Erie Canal didn't merely course through the heart of the village of Fairport. It was the village of Fairport.

The austere factories and warehouses looming over the famous canal had life largely because of the steady barge and boat traffic below. The rough-hewn village of several thousand existed only because the canal linked it to Rochester, western Monroe County and points farther on.



Then things changed. As a commercial lifeline, the Erie Canal went head to head with the railroads, interstate highways and the airlines. The canal, one of America's greatest public works projects, lost at every turn.

Canal towns and villages had to change. Some factories closed or moved. Many people migrated to suburban streets outside the village. By the 1970s, the great waterway was essentially a recreational afterthought, a summer respite for boaters.



Communities like Fairport, whose identity was wrapped up with the canal and supporting freight rail, had to adjust. They had to figure out how to transform an industrial district into a retail center and do it on a small village's small budget.

Every Erie Canal stop has had the same challenge over the past 20 or 30 years. Some, such as Spencerport and Pittsford, have succeeded. Others have struggled.

In Fairport, a collaborative framework and economic development tools allowed the village and businesses to fill in the retail gaps. The result has been the flowering of small business and retail — grocery, pharmacy, rental housing, hotel lodging — along the canal, within hailing distance of the Main Street corridor.

Red Bird Market opened two years ago in Fairport Village Landing, an outdoor mall just off Main Street. Owner Julie Stolze, who has lived in

the village for 20 years, said she knew there was a need for a grocery store close to village homes and apartments.

"I kept waiting for one to open after Tops closed," she said. "And finally I did it myself." True to Fairport's close-knit community feel, Stolze favors local, independent vendors over more corporate suppliers. She carries produce from the Fairport Farmers Market, products from Flour City Pasta, pies from The Pie Lady, a local baker, and other items, including Harry's Dog Treats, made in Pittsford.

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Residents respond

Fairport Pharmacy opened several years ago, cheering local residents who had complained about chain-store designs on the village. The new pharmacy is independently owned. That made a difference to residents. Skip's Meat Market in the Landing teetered on the brink two years ago. But business perked up when a story about the store's plight was published and people learned of the situation. The community helped — in part because Skip's is an institution.

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"It was the village," owner Donna Pink said. "They responded and we're still here and doing well."

Fairport's successes have come from making use of public funding and developing a consistent and workable sense of what a canalside village should look and feel like.

On the national scene, the public and private sectors often behave as adversaries. But in communities like Fairport, there is no warring ideology. Survival requires working together.

"It started long before I got here," Kal Wysokowski said. She is executive director of the village's Office of Community and Economic Development. "The village and the canal are the heart of the community. We have a lot of great retail here and we work hard to bring in those that fit with the community's character. We like independent businesses, but that doesn't mean we won't work with the chains."

Consistent look

Fairport, like Pittsford and other villages, realized that consistent design standards are important in establishing a welcoming identity. The village is less than two square miles. In a space that small, a consistent look, one that is clean and as uniform as possible, is a proven advantage.

"We had issues with Walgreens when it wanted to come into the village," Wysokowski said. "But I think these companies are loosening in their demands that communities accede to their style or façade requirements."

What Fairport has, said Scott Winner, director of the Fairport Village Partnership, a nonprofit that advances local business goals, is a commitment to definable, attainable goals and structures to meet that commitment.

"There's rarely debate in our meetings about whether we should do something," Winner said. "The questions are around how to do them, not whether to do them."

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It helps that the village, through Wysokowski and her office, has concentrated financial authority and power. Fairport has its own Industrial Development Agency, able to float bonds and issue tax breaks. It has its own Urban Renewal Agency and Section 8 housing arm, enabling it to access federal dollars for the village. Each of those elements, as well as the Fairport Village Partnership, serves under the broad umbrella of Wysokowski's leadership.

Using \$2.8 million raised through IDA bonds, the village rehabilitated the old DeLand chemical factory on Liftbridge Lane, reinventing it as mixed-use commercial building called The Box Factory, with a café and ice cream shop on the first floor and offices upstairs.

Using grants and loans, some from the state's Main Street community development program, the village has helped revive Liftbridge Lane, which is just east of the classic, metal-decked lift bridge that carries Main Street over the canal. "We have the Blue Cactus Grille and Mulconry's there," Wysokowski said.

Mulconry's owner Damian Mulconry said he chose to build a new space for the restaurant rather than renovate one of the old structures along the water.

"The village was there all the way for us," he said.

Traffic jams

Parking is a plus for shoppers in the village. There are more than 900 public spaces, including an enclosed garage, and on most days there are plenty of spots, though Wysokowski said tourists sometimes don't know where the lots are.

But issues remain. The village and Fairport Partnership want to bring in a hotel, but have yet to find one that fits the village's character.

And the village hasn't done much yet about Main Street traffic, which backs up during the busy summer months, annoying motorists and making it tough to pull out of side streets.

"We're going to synchronize the lights to help keep the traffic moving," Wysokowski said.

And retailers, despite all the focused attention from Village Hall and business support groups, still come and go. Karen's Crafts, a large shop in the Village Landing mall, closed three years ago. Skateworks, an apparel shop for figure skaters and dancers, went out of business several months ago. Short summers can put pressure on new businesses — a bad June and July could be a death knell.

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Still, the retail vacancy in the village is 5 percent or less, and the strategy — private-public cooperation and collaboration, help for new retail and small businesses, open communication lines and an adherence to design standards — seems suited to withstanding the ups and downs of economic cycles.

It's all pretty positive from where Dave Wahl of Macedon sits.

That's on a cushioned bench inside his cabin cruiser, tied dockside on the canal near the lift bridge. On this day, the canal looks as placid as a country stream.

Wahl is a veteran boater — he's on his fourth vessel — and does a lot of canal excursions. Fairport is always on his overnight-stop list.

"Fairport does it right," he said.

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