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Mt. Clemens embraces dual roles: Office by day, entertainment by night

By Laura Cassar
Special to Crain's Detroit Business



Photo by EDWARD MAURER Michelle Weiss of the Mount Clemens Downtown Development Authority (left) and the city's mayor, Barb Dempsey, in Mount Clemens. Thirty years after trying to wake up downtown, the city is now letting the market decide its course of development.

Thirty years ago, 31 downtown Mount Clemens business owners paid \$130 apiece to have their names printed on coffee mugs that proclaimed "I love Mount Clemens."

The mugs were part of a campaign to help revitalize their

Snapshot of downtown Mt. Clemens

Owners of a used book store, boutique, and bar talk about doing business in downtown Mt. Clemens. [See story.](#)

Remaking Mt. Clemens

Selected redevelopment sites:

- The former **Greco Title** building, 118 Cass Ave.: Purchased last year by **SVS Vision Optical**

quiet downtown — to wake things up after the lawyers in the county seat locked up their offices for the day.

Michelle Weiss still has her mug displayed on a shelf in her downtown office.

"This town shut down at 5 p.m.," said Weiss, marketing and events coordinator for the **Mount Clemens Downtown Development Authority**.

The year of the mugs, 1985, *Crain's Detroit Business* reported on the DDA's efforts to bring people downtown at night with live entertainment and to focus on recruiting retail to complement the downtown's predominantly office tenants.

From the archives: Merchants field efforts to keep downtown alive (June 10, 1985)

Weiss, who at the time owned **Natures Accents**, a floral shop, recalls today how in 1985 all the businesses on one main strip, Walnut Street, committed to staying open until 8 p.m. on Thursdays and Fridays — "for a whole year, no matter what; no excuses."

When the year ended, those business owners kept the extended hours and others joined them, in part motivated by the evening entertainment and events that now number more than 50 annually.

But on the roster of downtown businesses, retail is still secondary to office space. And Mount Clemens is starting to realize that's no longer worth worrying about.

Instead, the community is embracing its more market-driven role as a venue for daytime office space and nighttime entertainment uses. That includes finding a buyer for the vacant and bankrupt **Emerald Theatre**, a landmark building in the city.

"You can't change what people want," said Kent Kukuk, the DDA's executive director in the 1990s and 2000s.

"Every town is unique. Mount Clemens is always going to be heavy on office space because of the county seat draw. It's figuring out what your demo is asking for," said Kukuk, who went on to work for the **Michigan Economic Development Corp.** and is now retired. The DDA now operates without an executive director.

That "figuring it out" has taken several iterations over the past three decades. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, openings of nightclubs like **Hayloft** and **Desperado's** led downtown leaders to realize they were an event-driven destination, Weiss said.

By the late 1990s, they were putting a focus on physical changes — adding lights, building brick streets and increasing parking to help make downtown more of a social gathering place.

"People don't expect a downtown to compete with a mall — nor do they want it to," Kukuk said.

"They were looking for a place to gather, someplace social to have a good time, a nice place to walk, so that's what we embraced."

OU campus

Having a place to gather — specifically "milling around town" — is something 82-year-old Gebran "Gabe" Anton wants to see more of.

Anton, a lifelong Mount Clemens resident and business owner, and his business partner Stuart Frankel in 2010 donated space valued at about \$2 million for **Oakland University** to open a Macomb satellite campus. Anton

Centers and now redeveloped into its new headquarters.

- The **Macomb Music Theatre**, formerly the **Emerald Theatre** building, 31-33 N. Walnut St.: Currently vacant. The previous owner went bankrupt, and the property receiver is searching for a new owner.
- The former **Turning Point** building, 213-215 S. Main St.: Purchased by the **Macomb County Rotating Emergency Shelter Team**, or MCREST, in April. It will become a shelter for abused women and children who are transitioning out of abusive situations.
- The former **Detroit Pub**, 76 Macomb Place: Purchased by Scott Atchison and converted into **Abbibo Dining & Spirits**, which opened in September.
- **John Barleycorn's Bar and Grill**, 110-112 Macomb Place: Under contract to be sold to the owners of the nearby **Bath City Bistro Inc.** and the **Orleans Sports Café**. The space will be renovated.

Sources: *Crain's* research, Anton Sowerby & Associates



Photo by EDWARD MAURER "I love Mount Clemens" coffee mugs were part of an effort to bring life to downtown.



wants to see that campus expand.

"I'm not a college graduate," said Anton, who took over his family's shoe business at age 17 when his father died. After selling shoes, Anton went on to operate a chain of clothing stores, **Anton's Gentlemen's Apparel**. He is now partner in **Anton Sowerby & Associates**, a real estate brokerage firm downtown.

"Unfortunately, my father died and I had a family to support, but I've always enjoyed the environment a college town creates — like Ann Arbor or East Lansing. That's not easy to duplicate.

"When we gave OU the building, we planted a seed for that."

The satellite campus, inside the former **Towne Square II** building at 20 S. Main St., has 50 faculty members, 900 students and offers seven degree programs.



Photo by EDWARD MAURER Oakland University's satellite campus in Mount Clemens.

It's a commuter school, but the students have embraced the community, said Julie Dichtel, Oakland University-Macomb interim executive director. Students participate in downtown parades and volunteer at festivals; an alumni event brought together 350 former students during a fireworks show last summer.

"There's a lot of real estate around there, and I'm hoping OU will buy it and expand here," Anton said. "I would like to see more students."

OU has no specific Mount Clemens expansion plans in the works.

Occupancy rate

Filling some of the downtown's long-empty buildings is a priority. Isam Yaldo, president of **Yaldo Construction** in Farmington Hills, purchased the former Macomb Mews, a mall shuttered in 2010, for \$265,000 in March. Yaldo has plans to turn the second floor into lofts — tentative plans call for about 10 units — with retail and parking on the first floor. It was his first purchase in the city; he said the price and the opportunity to use his creativity to help boost the city were what attracted him.

Real estate broker Joe Sowerby, also at Anton Sowerby & Associates, said that for out-of-town buyers like Yaldo, Mount Clemens is a bargain.

Sowerby said the price per square foot in Mount Clemens has not recovered the way other communities have. What might sell for \$60-\$80 per square foot in St. Clair Shores or Clinton Township can still be priced at \$40-\$50 in Mount Clemens.

The overall downtown occupancy rate is about 65 percent: About 38 percent is office space, about 23 percent retail/restaurant, and the rest is mixed-use.

The vacancies were apparent after the economic downturn of 2008. "It was a real estate tsunami," said Sowerby, who guessed that about 100,000 square feet of business closed up around that time and that "the ripple effect could be felt through all of downtown."

Theater vital component

Perhaps the most prominent empty building is the Emerald Theatre, designed and built in 1921 by C. Howard Crane, who seven years later went on to design the **Fox Theatre** in Detroit. In 2012, the building was purchased and restored by Wally Mona and Marc Beginin, who changed its name to **Macomb Music Theatre**. But the theater closed last fall, and the owners filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in March.

The theater is for sale for \$1.295 million.

"If we could get the right person in there, the impact on downtown would be huge," Sowerby said. "That's getting 1,200 people down here at night. It's a vital component to this town."

The DDA is hosting a property tour of the theater and more than 15 other properties next month. Weiss said they are hoping to attract at least 25 potential investors.

In addition to the DDA efforts, Macomb County is spending \$65 million on a downtown revitalization plan that includes renovations to the county Circuit Court and administration buildings, as well as replacement of a parking deck.



Photo by EDWARD MAURER Gebran "Gabe" Anton, a lifelong resident of Mount Clemens, donated space for Oakland University to open a Macomb satellite campus.

Steve Cassin, director of the **Macomb County Department of Planning and Economic Development**, said Mount Clemens is one example of the county's economy on the upswing.

"With heavy investment from Oakland University in their satellite campus and the county investing in substantial building improvements, there are lots of reasons to believe that Mount Clemens will become the vibrant, happening downtown it has the potential to become," he said.

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