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 Business

## New tenants 'pop up' in vacant downtown stores



**Kristyna Wentz-Graff**

**Liz LeBlanc organizes a display table at the Shorewood location of SHOP, a clothing boutique. Liz and her mother, Mary LeBlanc, will take advantage of a free-rent deal to open a second store in downtown Milwaukee for the holiday season. Depending on how the new location performs, they may keep it open.**

By [Doris Hajewski](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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A couple of retailers who started their business in a dismal retail climate - and survived - are taking a chance on second locations in downtown Milwaukee for the holiday season, enticed by the free-rent offer from the downtown business improvement district.

SHOP, a women's clothing boutique in Shorewood, and Broadway Paper, a Third Ward paper products shop, are the first and, at this point, the only takers for the holiday season free-rent deal for a number of street-front properties east of the Milwaukee River.

"I'm excited to be a part of change in the city," said Kate Strzok, who bought Broadway Paper about 18 months ago. The 26-year-old is the fourth woman to own Broadway Paper. The business, which makes more than half its revenue with wedding stationery, has been successful despite the recession, Strzok said.

Mary LeBlanc and her daughter Liz opened SHOP at 1918 E. Capitol Drive in the fall of 2007, just ahead of what turned out to be a bleak holiday season for the retail industry. The clothing boutique has been further challenged this year with street construction on Capitol Drive, but is doing OK, Mary LeBlanc said.

Both owners expect to open their second locations in mid-October in the Colby Abbot Building at N. Milwaukee and E. Mason streets. The vacant street-level space in that building is among several locations that had been offered in the business improvement district's holiday Retail Emporium program.

Deanna Inniss, retail recruiter for the BID, has talked with about 50 local retailers regarding 30 vacant spaces that were included in the free-rent offer.

"The interest has been great and all the buzz has resulted in many inquiries on long-term leases with my property owner's buildings in general," Inniss said.

The deadline has passed for applications for the program, but Inniss expects to have a few more signers for the program. Under terms of the deal, LeBlanc and Strzok have agreed to the October openings and to staying open until Jan.15.

Strzok views the offer as an opportunity to offer some merchandise from her existing vendors that she doesn't now carry at her Third Ward store. The downtown location will be holiday-themed and have a selection of gifts for men.

While the corner of Mason and Milwaukee streets isn't far from her Broadway location, she sees it as a different trade area.

"It seems a little strange," Strzok said of the proximity. But people who work downtown don't often walk to the Third Ward to shop, she said.

Strzok and LeBlanc view their new ventures as "pop-up stores." Retailers coined the term in recent

years to describe temporary locations aimed at drawing attention to a business or to a new product line. But both are open to the idea of staying and paying rent for their new stores, if sales are strong enough.

Inniss came up with the idea for the three-month free-rent deal to spur interest in the many empty retail locations in the downtown area. The vacancy rate for retail space downtown is 16.9%, according to a survey from CB Richard Ellis. That is the second-highest rate in the metro area. Hardest hit with vacancies is the northwest side of Milwaukee, with 18.9% of retail space empty.

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