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Selling downtown: Recruiter focuses on sparking area development



Gary Porter

Deanna Inniss??? recruiting efforts are focused on small independents rather than chain retailers. Inniss??? goal is to attract retailers that would be unique to downtown and would give suburbanites a reason to come downtown to shop.

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

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Armed with enthusiasm and the belief that the recession won't last forever, Deanna Inniss is aiming to restart retail development downtown, a difficult task even in a good economy.

"I see it can come back again," said Inniss, in a lunchtime chat at the Milwaukee Public Market. "You need visionaries and you need pioneers to start it."

Inniss, a New York native, is a retail veteran recently hired by the downtown Business Improvement District No. 21. The district is a public entity that has authority to tax businesses within its boundaries. The money is used to promote business in the area, in this case, by paying Inniss to recruit retailers.

Her project focuses on street retail and includes street-front retail space that is part of The Shops of Grand Avenue, but not space inside the mall. But Inniss' effort comes at the same time that the downtown mall is running a free-rent contest to bring in more tenants.

Both Inniss and Erica Anderson, director of marketing and specialty leasing at the Grand Avenue, have the same goal: to attract retailers that would be unique to downtown and would give suburbanites a reason to come downtown to shop.

Inniss was a private label product developer for Kohl's Corp., in the baby and toddler area, and before that spent eight years in a similar role at Gap Inc. in San Francisco. In 2005, she left Kohl's to follow her entrepreneurial dream of opening her own store, Freckle Face, an upscale baby boutique in the Third Ward.

She signed on with a downtown business improvement district early this year as a 28-hour-per-week retail recruiter, after a consultant hired by the improvement district recommended that the job be created. Downtown Works, a Washington, D.C., consulting firm, said the district needed someone to beat the drum for retail if it wanted to see a recovery in Milwaukee's downtown.

The [Downtown Works report](#) says the current population of residents and downtown workers can support 1.5 million square feet of retail, and catalogs 1.1 million square feet of existing street front retail. This is in addition to the space in the Shops of Grand Avenue, which is not included in the report.

The report says that 148,000 square feet of street-front retail space is vacant and recommends converting 229,000 square feet of space from current uses to retail. Offices should not occupy street front space that could potentially be used by retailers, Inniss said.

Meanwhile, the Grand Avenue is struggling to fill its empty space, which became more abundant with the recent closing of the Old Navy store, and before that, Linens 'n Things. The mall, with a vacancy rate now at 30%, launched a recruiting contest this summer called "Retail Therapy" offering free rent for a year to the winning entrant.

The contest is open to new businesses or existing retailers with no more than 10 locations that have not been tenants in the Grand Avenue for at least three years. In addition to the free rent, the winner will get free advertising and design services from local companies.

"They have to be serious," Anderson said. "We don't want something that is fly-by-night."

The large spaces left by Old Navy and Linens aren't available for the free-rent contest, but the mall will consider giving away a space as large as the one vacated by the Gap a few years ago, Anderson said. The mall is in talks with prospective tenants for the big box spaces, she said. Opening up street-level access from N. 2nd St. to the former Linens space is a priority in the discussions, but not a deal-breaker, she said.

Inniss' recruiting efforts are focused on small independents rather than chain retailers. In the months since she was hired, Inniss has visited retailers in Madison, Lake Geneva and Chicago to talk about opportunities for them in Milwaukee's downtown.

No one expects Inniss to work a quick miracle. The Downtown Works report says the city shouldn't expect to see any real estate deals from Inniss' efforts for up to a year. As an example, the report points out that Austin, Texas, started a similar program in July 2005 and is now seeing major changes in its downtown, with 20 signed deals. That represents a 7% return on 289 qualified leads that the Austin recruiter turned up.

Inniss will make referrals to brokers representing properties of interest to her prospects. If there is no broker, she will connect the prospect with the property owner.

"I'll be as involved as they want me to be," Inniss said. "I might do some hand-holding."



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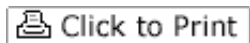
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