

## **Locally-Owned Independent Retailers Are An Important Ingredient For Sustainable Success In Downtown Pensacola**

Sometimes in our efforts to enhance and grow downtown, we overlook a tremendous local asset that is predominately centered in and near our City Center. Locally owned independent retail establishments are one of the uses that gives our downtown areas a unique flavor and color. These are the types of memorable places that help define the community and the experiences available here. Most often, such establishments exist one to the market and provide goods, services, or experiences that can't be found anywhere else. I would suggest that such is the case in Downtown Pensacola today. Eighty-three locally owned independent retailers can be found downtown. Collectively, these establishments comprise 92% of all retail businesses in the downtown. This is a significantly higher number and percentage than any other retail center in the region – as well as hundreds of other downtowns. Sure, we want some more national tenants. But, it's the uniqueness of locally owned independent retail establishments that help set Downtown Pensacola apart from other retail centers.

Downtown Pensacola is the most eclectic, historical, and interesting setting in our region. When we want visitors to experience the “real” Pensacola or the true flavor of our town, we encourage them to visit and enjoy all that downtown has to offer. It's that one part of our community that hasn't been infused by cookie-cutter design, sterile storefronts, and predictable “anycity” offerings. A significant collection of truly unique goods and services that can't be found anywhere else exist in downtown Pensacola. Such offerings help reinforce an atmosphere and setting that encourages exploration and confidence by patrons, customers, and visitors. It also insures that Pensacola will forever be Pensacola and at the same time helps keep our community a special place.

Regional mall and strip center developers have known about the relationship between consumer confidence and local independent businesses for decades. It's not hard to understand why such developers seek to give legitimacy to their “creations” by trying to lure one or more high-profile local independent retailer into their centers. Increasingly in recent years, cities with seemingly successful downtown retail districts comprised almost exclusively of national tenants have also come to realize that the romantic “buy where the locals buy” or “one to the market” experience is missing. For this reason, cities like Portland and Boston have focused efforts to attract and facilitate the location of more local independent retailers to their downtowns.

Local independent retailers also add more to the economic success of the community where they are located. Dollars taken in by local independent retailers turn-over three times more often within the community (before leaving the community) than do those revenues taken in by national chains. Such dollars are spent hiring local people who in turn make purchases from other local businesses. Local independent retailers are also much more inclined to spend money with other local businesses (suppliers and professional firms) than are their nationwide counterparts.

The owner is usually in the store or restaurant at locally owned independent retailers. As a result, they pay more attention to their customers and are better able to help find the goods or experiences that are being sought. Decisions about what type of merchandise to carry or what menu items to change are made locally by the owners ( as opposed to a corporate board room thousands of miles away) to better reflect the wants and needs of their customers and the community where they operate.

Locally owned independent retailers tend to support many more local causes within the community than do national chains. They do this because they too call Pensacola home. They want this community to be all that it can be because they: have a home here, have children or grandchildren in the local schools, are part of a local congregation of faith, and care about whether the arts are available and accessible more than a few times each year.

Communities, like Pensacola, with large concentrations of locally-owned independent retailers tend to be more interesting, more successful, more stable, and better poised to take advantage of that desire by today's consumers and tourists to do, see, and experience something out of the ordinary. It's time to fully recognize and use the tremendous asset that the eighty-three locally owned independent retailers in Downtown Pensacola bring to our efforts to grow and enhance the heart of our community.