

# The Morning News

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## Springdale Officials Seek To Revitalize Downtown

*By Eric Evridge  
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SPRINGDALE - The effort to keep downtown Springdale economically viable is an uphill battle.

The issue isn't about saving Emma Avenue because that implies something is wrong with Emma Avenue, said Perry Webb, president and chief executive officer of the Springdale Chamber of Commerce.

"Emma's not going to be like it was in the 1940s on a Saturday afternoon where it's jam-packed full of people," he said. "The modern economy won't allow it to be the thriving economic center it once was."

There's no easy or inexpensive way to drive more of the traffic business owners want into the area, although the chamber of commerce continues to explore options, Webb said. There are improvements that can be made but examples of success are rare, he added.

One plan is to broker a new facility that could drive its own economy such as an office building or a college branch. Businesses could spring up to support the people coming to the area, he continued.

The chamber put that plan on hold, Webb said, because the economy is in a slump, adding "we now have to look more closely at what tools we have available to work with."

The chamber is leery of spending too much of the city's funds on redevelopment, he cautioned.

"We can't just throw money in a hole," he said.

"Ultimately, it's the building's owner that has to make a decision to improve the building," Webb said.

"The chamber's role is to serve as a resource, providing needed expertise, resources, and through a business recruitment process, provide potential business clients for the property owners," he added.

Before any plan can move forward residents, business owners and city officials must reach a consensus for a reasonable plan of action, Webb said, adding it's not going to be easy and it's likely to be expensive for the city and business owners, he said.

### Creating A Niche Market

Emma Avenue might not be the retail Mecca it was, but it has the ability to create a niche market where people can come for specific products or needs, Webb said.

Destination-based shops, such as law offices and specialty stores, are natural across the country. These places provide a specific service or product and have established client bases, Webb said.

Not every merchant on Emma Avenue is convinced niche business will save the area.

Gene Austin, a 56-year employee of Spencer Printing, 322 E. Emma Ave., said he isn't sure anything can be done to save downtown.

"It would have to be a fresh start and I can't foresee that ever happening," he said.

Older businesses declined in profitability and left but haven't been replaced by new businesses, Austin continued.

"I don't think there's anything that could happen in downtown because everything's moving west," he added, referring to big businesses and attractions moving near Interstate 540 such as the Arvest Ballpark.

### Businesses To City: Help

Some Emma Avenue businessmen contend the city could do more to help foster growth and prosperity. Economic recession, city ordinances, limited parking and a lack of entertainment venues keep people from coming downtown, according to businessmen on Emma Avenue.

Gale Gage, assistant manager at Orscheln Farm & Home, 516 E. Emma Ave., said the city could improve parks in the area and encourage new business such as coffee shops and book stores.

Setting up new park equipment and establishing Internet hot-spots for teenagers would help drive more people downtown, Gage said.

Chamber officials understand the need to support local businesses, but Webb says money is a significant problem.

Emma Avenue, like so many other small-town downtown business districts emerging into cities, is an afterthought as growth spreads to new superhighways and suburban centers.

In 2004 to 2005, the Springdale Tomorrow initiative, administered by the chamber, addressed specific needs of the community. Around 60 interviews with local business leaders were conducted to determine the funding of five community initiatives. Downtown redevelopment was considered the lowest priority, behind elevating retail and entertainment quality; recruitment and development of high-tech jobs; maintaining a pro-business attitude; and development of technology programs for small business to boost profitability, Webb said.

#### Past Efforts

City and chamber leaders poured energy and money into the former business hub of the city in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. The city spent nearly \$1 million from 1996 to 2002 in an effort to beautify the area with additions such as sidewalk repair and landscape improvements.

There was \$550,000 from four federal grants available and the city split the difference - spending \$438,215 of city money, said Ben Peters, city engineer for Springdale.

The money came from the Arkansas Highway Department and Emma Avenue business owners, Webb said. Most of what's been done came from those funds.

#### Unpopular Regulations

Despite the beautification, scores of meetings and other efforts over the past 10-12 years hasn't improved the situation on Emma Avenue and some businessmen contend the city is doing more to hurt business than help.

Parking is a big problem here, said Stephanie Davis, owner of Rick's Shoes, 103 W. Emma Ave. There's no accessibility and the problem is worsened by the city's new sign ordinance, she said.

"We can't put signs on the sidewalk anymore. It has to be on the property and cars can't see them as they drive by now," she said.

Jay Graffis, general manager of the Famous Hardware Antique Mall, 113 W. Emma Ave. agrees.

"There's only two spots in front of our huge store. Signs also have to fit certain guidelines and sizes," Graffis said. "The city is taking away our ability to sell product."

#### Poor Economy Takes Toll

The mostly older buildings on Emma Avenue also take a toll on businessmen.

Some store owners are struggling to keep the business profitable and make needed repairs to keep the building serviceable and attractive for customers.

"Last year was bad. This year it's just getting worse," said Rosa Gamez, owner of Monterrey Flea Market. Revenue for the flea market is down about 50 percent from two years ago, she said.

Gamez blames the economy, gas prices and the lack of city support for the downturn. It's hard to invest in sidewalk repair when business is down and you're spending significant income on building repairs, she said.

She spent \$2,000 for repairing the ceiling and needs to spend another \$2,000 for building wiring repair, she said.

"We've done so much work on this building it's unbelievable," she said.

Webb said he understands the concerns of the owners but notes there's no easy fix to their concerns.

"It's a tough nut to crack. It's not something \$25 million couldn't solve but coming up with \$25 million is the hard part," he said.