



Do local retailers have a haven? Try Cambridge - by Carol Todreas

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This summer I spoke to Lisa Hemmerle, director of economic development for the city of Cambridge, about the state of local retail within the city. Why? Because Cambridge has become a destination for great eating and even during the ballooning e-commerce growth an appealing haven for small store owners and shoppers.

For example on Broadway, behind Central Sq., between Kendall and Harvard Sqs. there are several notable local retailers, such as The Garment District and Boston Costume Shop, The Lamplighter Brewery, Broadway Bicycle Shop, Yayla Tribal Rugs. Not to mention Barisimo 364 and Longfellows coffee shops amidst a couple of convenience stores. Then there is Amalia's Trattoria, Mu Lan Taiwanese Specialties, and the Kendall Kitchen, all local eateries in this general area succeeding among many larger high profile restaurants in Central, Kendall, and Harvard Sqs.

When most of this part of Cambridge is known for its unaffordable retail street locations, how are small local businesses flourishing and sustained? Particularly in such a prominent zone where rents are supposedly on fire and many locations are dominated by rich national chains? And, if it can be done in Cambridge, why not elsewhere?

Here is what I learned:

Cambridge really cares about local merchants and entrepreneurs as well as a healthy variety of businesses in their commercial districts. Local, small businesses need assistance. The city's

Economic Development Division (EDD) is there to help: To create a model not only for Cambridge to protect and sustain independent businesses, but they also hope it can be a model used around the country.

The EDD has a staff of four and uses different types of consultants to help businesses with their design and business model. Not only do they hire consultants for marketing, signage, and general business practices, but they hold workshops and develop programs to encourage and grow small business owners and entrepreneurs.

Last year they held 24 workshops, used CD Block grants, and held a Business Summit, all to assist in training and educating landlords and tenants in best business practices from enhancing storefronts, to sustaining employees with living wages, to building a reality-based business model for execution. They also conducted intercept surveys to determine customer wants and needs and developed a Retail Strategy Plan for the entire city.

Such planning and economic development measures require dedication and commitment. This is clearly stated in the Cambridge Economic Development Division Mission Statement, and even a glance at their website www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/econdev shows just how well conceived their approach is to maintaining a well-balanced, vibrant physical retail scene. The good news is that local retail can be an option and hopefully one that will grow.

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