



Push on to shop in the city

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Two local organizations are urging shoppers to spend their money in neighborhood stores rather than the mall this holiday season.

The Chesapeake Sustainable Business Alliance and Baltimore Main Streets are both sponsoring events focused on bringing shoppers into city neighborhoods and away from national big-box stores and shopping malls.

The organizations are kicking off campaigns this month aimed at encouraging shoppers to think locally.

"I think that people are programmed to go to a mall, park the car and power shop," said Mary Pat Fannon, director of Baltimore Main Streets, a group that oversees efforts of the nine city-designated main street shopping districts. "We need to teach them that they can do the same at local shopping districts in the city."

Part of accomplishing this, she said, is by educating shoppers to know they can get the same benefits from shopping districts as they do at malls or big-box stores.

To do this, Baltimore Main Streets, which is part of the Baltimore Development Corp., is sponsoring a month-long series of events at nine of the city's Main Street shopping districts — Belair-Edison, East Monument Street, Federal Hill, Fells Point, Govanstown, Highlandtown, Pennsylvania Avenue, Pigtown and Waverly. By bringing people in to hear Christmas caroling and for tree lightings, the group believes it will convince visitors that shopping in the districts is a viable alternative.

Winning them over for the holidays is only a short-term goal, though. The hope is that these destinations will eventually become the first choice for shoppers, Fannon said.

The economic impact of shopping locally doesn't just affect businesses in a district, it affects the whole neighborhood, said Keith Losoya, executive director of the Chesapeake Sustainable Business Alliance.

According to studies by the alliance, for every \$100 spent at a locally owned business, \$45 comes back to the



Claudia Towles, proprietor of aMuse of Fells Point, arranges some merchandise in the shop window. A pair of organizations are kicking off campaigns this month aimed at encouraging shoppers to shop at Baltimore businesses.

Photo by Max Franz

community. Only \$14 comes back from money spent at national chain stores.

But, before shopping districts can even begin to reap the benefits, shoppers need to change their habits, he said. While Losoya admits this could be difficult, he said that by marketing the districts, buyers can begin to change their ways and not depend on big boxes and national chains.

"Some think it's impossible to change habits," he said, pointing to cigarette smoking and seat belt usage as examples of how consumer habits have changed. "We believe that over time, they'll buy local. We just need to get them to start thinking of [shopping locally] first."

The alliance bought advertising this month in *Urbanite*, a magazine that reaches most of the state, though the focus of its "Buy Local Baltimore" campaign is the city.

The campaign is year-round, but to highlight the shopping from locally owned stores during the holidays, the Alliance is sponsoring "Buy Local Baltimore Week" beginning Saturday and running through Dec. 9.

Businesses involved will have signage in their store windows and maps will be handed out promoting stores.

Tom Saquella, president of the Maryland Retailers Association, said these types of promotions are good for business because they bring more competition.

But, he cautions, they can only compete so much.

"They can't compete with malls and the big boxes when it comes to spending marketing dollars," he said. This obvious discrepancy in spending especially affects smaller businesses earlier in the shopping season.

Smaller stores, which do nearly half of their business during the holidays, begin to see a jump in business about two to three weeks after Black Friday, he said. Customers "go to the mall or a big box to see what they want, then go back to Main Street to buy it."

That doesn't always work, though. Smaller stores, Saquella admits, don't always carry the products available at the larger stores.

"It's hard for them to compete on price and product," he said. "So they need to promote the uniqueness you won't find in a mall."

One shop owner stresses just that as she tries to corner the toy market from her store in Fells Point.

Claudia Towles of aMuse Toys said her unique hook is the fact that she lives in the same neighborhood as her store.

Being a parent, a business owner and resident of the same community she lives in allows her to better serve her customers in a way a major store is unable to, she said. "I get to know people and that makes them feel comfortable about where they are shopping. People know that you have a sense of the community and they love it."

Plus, she said, being a local business owner means she can give back to the community.

Towles said she is active in local schools and donates time and money to causes that affect her neighborhood.

"You want to be a great citizen as well as a business owner," she said.

For information on the programs and the communities sponsored, visit www.buylocalbaltimore.com or

www.baltimoremainstreets.com

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