

# Merchants seek local support

BY CAROLYN STEEVES

**MATTHEWS** — Inside the historic structures that line downtown Matthews are dozens of small businesses, some as old as the buildings in which they reside.

Renfrow Hardware & General Merchandise, which occupies four storefronts on Trade Street, has been downtown since 1900.

Owner David Blackley said that even though historic downtowns are fading out across the country, he sees no reason to follow that trend.

"I don't see enough drawbacks to worry about, otherwise we wouldn't be here," he said. "We'd be in a shopping center. You can be your own person here. Shopping centers have the same hours and the landlord and a lot of rules."

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## Hardware

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Blackley, who grew up in Matthews, has owned the hardware store for about 25 years. Over that time, he has seen a definite increase in Matthew's population and surrounding businesses.

"The downtown was about the only thing here when I was growing up in this town," he recalled, adding that there were no "big box" stores like

Home Depot or Wal-Mart.

Blackley said he believes the arrival of such large retailers has made downtown stores a last resort for many shoppers.

"I'd like to see the townspeople that live within probably five or ten miles of this downtown try downtown merchants first instead of last," he said. "We're oftentimes people's last choice." Shoppers frequently come to Renfrow Hardware only after failing to find what they're looking for at a handful of other stores, he said.

"Our biggest concern is that the townspeople don't choose to patronize their downtown first," he said. "But we can live with that; we just work around it. Fortunately, we have a lot of very loyal customers that come. But I don't think the general public realizes how powerful their dollars are."

Like Blackley, Brenda Ralston said her customers appreciate the history they find in her building, which houses By Design Scrubs. Ralston manages the shop, which opened in June 2007 to sell medical scrubs apparel.

"It's a really unique layout and a lot of the people who come in notice the building," she said. "I think it makes it a little fun. It adds to the boutique feel."

Mayor Lee Myers said one of the town's best achievements has been preserving Matthews' historic buildings. A

renovated Matthews Market Place, formerly home to an old hotel, now houses a sports collectibles store, a watch and clock shop, a restaurant, a gift boutique and other shops.

Ralston said that while it has been challenging to offer enough parking to customers, that has not deterred shoppers. By Design Scrubs has done well in its first 18 months of business, she said.

Myers and other town officials have identified traffic and parking as major issues facing the downtown area and are trying to alleviate those problems with new regulations and capital improvement projects.

Blackley said that while downtown traffic can get "complicated," that's the case these days no matter where you go. He said that overall, Renfrow Hardware's downtown location is great because it is convenient to residents' homes and businesses.

"I'm sorry that the downtown does not get as much business from the taxpayers of Matthews as it should, but I guess that's not going to change," he said.

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