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Chelsea's loss is North Main's gain Peartree furnishings moving to downtown Ann Arbor

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Following a rash of shops recently leaving downtown Ann Arbor, Main Street will gain its first new durable goods retailer this year when Chelsea's Peartree home furnishings and gifts store opens in early November.

Peartree follows the addition of Edible Arrangements, a fruit basket company that opened in early October, to the 200 block of North Main Street.

"We think that that end of town is growing well," said Mary Schroer, whose identical twin daughters Jennifer Schroer and Amy Bolt started the family-owned home furnishings and gifts store a year ago. "We believe Ann Arbor is a place where people will come downtown to shop if there are things they want here, and if the hours are convenient."

Newcombe Clark, a downtown resident and junior partner with Bluestone Realty Advisors, brokered the deal to move Peartree from Chelsea to Ann Arbor. He said their business model, which depends on sales from the Internet, special orders and its storefront, is one that downtown Ann Arbor needs more of.

"They are a good fit for downtown and now that block is completely full," Clark said.

Since spring, Main Street area has lost stores like Ehnis & Sons, After Words, Love From Michigan and Forma Fine Crafts. Improv Inferno and Pepperz are gone and Jules Furniture and Voila are going out of business. Some existing stores, like King's Chosen and Vault of Midnight, took a couple of the vacant spaces, and some new service businesses like Salon Vox and restaurants like Vinology Wine Bar and Restaurant have opened.

Edible Arrangements, a chain that makes fruit "bouquets" arranged to look like flowers, took the space of Moderno, near the northwest corner of Main and Huron streets.

Indeed, both Edible Arrangements and Peartree join downtown at an odd time for the central business district. Michigan's faltering economy has hurt retailers across the state, including in Ann Arbor. However, the area's 10 percent vacancy rate in commercial spaces in the central business district - calculated by Bluestone - is below what some other Michigan downtowns are facing.

After a tough holiday season in 2005, many local shop owners are pinning their hopes on the upcoming 10 weeks before Christmas, the busiest shopping season of the year, to help them break even or turn a profit this year.

Several merchants like Hoi Polloi clothing boutique owner Lisa Shedlock say foot traffic has dropped and sales have declined steadily over the past year. She's cut staff, cut back on ordering new merchandise and even switched to a cheaper phone service to keep the trendy, two-and-a-half year old business afloat.

"We are struggling like everybody," Shedlock said.

Others, like Alan Friedman of Four Directions, said sales are steady to flat.

"I'm having a good year but I'm not breaking any records," said Friedman, crediting extended business hours and a diverse selection of goods for that. "We had a real good summer, and things are slow now but they are always slow now."

On the opposite end of both Friedman and Shedlock is Downtown Home & Garden owner Mark Hodesh. The longtime shop had its best year ever in 2005, and 2006 will likely top that.

"Each of the last five months have been record-breakers," Hodesh said. He attributed the growth to business fundamentals like capitalization, knowledgeable staff, loyal customers and the fact that his shop sells basic household items.

Adjacent parking and owning its own building also help the 100-year-old business thrive. "Things are hard in Michigan, a lot of people aren't working," Hodesh said. "That can just show more on a newer business."

Mary Schroer acknowledged the fact that some stores are struggling downtown, but said she's confident in Peartree. Her daughters opened the store "with the idea they would buy what they liked, and they are sticking true to that," she said. That means a mix of "shabby chic" pieces, traditional items and an extensive baby section, since Amy Bolt has four kids, and a puppy section, in honor of Jennifer Schroer's beloved chihuahua/Jack Russell terrier mix.

The shop's furniture offerings include couches, armoires, bookcases, vanities and cabinets, much of which is available through their Web site, peartreehome.com.

Peartree will move on Halloween into the space at 217 N. Main St., formerly occupied by Art Warehouse, which closed a year ago. The shop hopes to be open by Nov. 3.

"We are not truly worried or we would not be doing this," said Mary Schroer, a former state representative. "Ann Arbor is somewhat insulated from the rest of the economy because of the university ... and I am happy that we have an online business - it gives you a little more stability."

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