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Small business growth in down economy

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IONIA - With many people out of work and looking for new opportunities, small, start-up businesses are becoming more and more popular amongst people looking for something to do.

Tina Conner-Wellman, Ionia Area Chamber of Commerce Executive Director, said not only do small businesses allow people a way for income, they also provide families with reassurance that there are ways to make money outside of corporate America.

"Starting a small business is tough," Wellman said, adding people have to go in with the desire and will to make it within the first two years.

According to Wellman, 80 percent of small businesses fail within the first two years of operation.

And even overcoming these challenges, it isn't an easy coast to making money.

Wellman said being in business two or 20 years, there is always a challenge to be had.

In spite of the challenges, there is support from local business supporters to foster small businesses.

"We support it with our relationship with SCORE," Wellman said, adding they also provide support it with the Small Business Association of Michigan.

According to Wellman, the Ionia chamber is one of the few chambers of commerce that offers a dual membership.

"I don't think people realize how difficult it is to be in business for yourself," Wellman said, adding people have to work harder than when working for another boss.

Not only are small businesses important to people's livelihoods, they are also important to the fabric of local communities.

"They are critical," Jason Eppler, Ionia City Manager, said. "They anchor the downtown."

He said this is a stark contrast to 40 to 50 years ago when downtowns were anchored by large department stores.

"Now, the small retailer really acts as the downtown anchor," Eppler said, adding oftentimes these are niche and specialty shops which cater to specific needs and wants.

Eppler wasn't alone in pointing out how important small businesses are to the downtown of

today.

"Small business is what runs downtown," Portland Main Street Manager and Downtown Development Authority Director Patrick Reagan said. "It's the lifeblood of downtown."

He said while shopping malls and big box stores have a place, that place isn't in the small town downtown area.

And there are plenty of examples of this type of business in and around the community, including the Around the Block Quilt Shop in Portland - a small business catering to quilters which recently expanded in size.

Owner Cathy McCann said her shop offers service not typically available at larger retail stores.

"We offer classes, and we do help the customers quite a bit," McCann said.

Like many other small business owners, she too knows success isn't easy, as she said she tells people that running the business isn't just about quilting all of the time, and there is plenty of hard work involved.

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