

Downtown Springfield a Great Place to do Business

Springfield *Republican* Newspaper

Sunday, February 10, 2008, By Patrick Johnson

When Erica I. Walch was looking last year for a suitable location for her new business, she went no farther than downtown Springfield. After one year in business, Walch, the president of Speak Easy, an accent modification program, said she is convinced she has made the right choice. "I'm doing really, really well. And next year will be even better," she said.

Speak Easy is located in a second-floor suite in the historic Walker Building, 2142 Main St., just across from the MassMutual Center. Her office is spacious and charming with brick walls and wood floors. Rent is less than \$500 per month and that includes utilities, she said. "I could have moved to Boston and been busier than I am now," she said. But she wouldn't be able to afford to live in Boston, she added.

Walch said she expects other small-business owners will follow her example and look toward downtown Springfield.



Speak Easy is a 14-hour program designed to teach non-native English speakers to sound somewhat less non-native. The accent-modification program trains its students to minimize their accents.

For example, she cited a recent client, a Central American doctor working at Baystate Medical Center. The man is a doctor, so he is obviously intelligent, and while he is fluent in English, his accent simply gets in the way, Walch said. "Patients and other doctors had difficulty understanding him," she said.

While Speak Easy doesn't claim its program will transform an Eliza Doolittle into the belle of the embassy ball, people will at least be able to understand Eliza when she talks. The program promises to reduce anyone's accent enough for the person to function and be understood in American society, Walch said. She has three corporate clients, Baystate Medical Center, Lenox Saw in East Longmeadow, and Harvard University in Cambridge.

She said she chose downtown because she wanted to be able to walk to work, but now she finds herself driving to Cambridge one to two days a week to work with people at Harvard. With the area's increasing numbers of Russian, Hispanic and Vietnamese populations, she believes there are plenty of potential clients for her here.

Also working in her favor is Springfield's central position within the "Knowledge Corridor," the term given the area from Hartford to Amherst. Inside that corridor are 26 colleges and universities that draw faculty and students from around the world. Walch, 38, is a native of the city and is unashamedly a Springfield booster. "I love it here. I've very happy here," she said. "I like the smaller city atmosphere, and walking down the street and saying hello to people."

She is past president of two pro-downtown groups, the Armory-Quadrangle Civic Association, and the Mattoon Street Historic Preservation Association. In June, Walch and Robert S. McCarroll, a retired member of the city Planning Department, launched a Web site - www.choosespringfield.mass.com - that promotes places to live, work and play in downtown Springfield.

When looking objectively at Springfield, she said she sees a couple of factors that will contribute to a turnaround. Residential and retail properties in the downtown areas are relatively plentiful and at low cost, much more than in surrounding communities, she said. Also, Springfield has infrastructure in place to aid small business start-ups, including the SCORE program and the Scibelli Enterprise Center, both at Springfield Technical Community College.

Walch said in the time she has lived and worked in downtown Springfield, she is seeing signs of revitalization, including new businesses opening in stores and office space that had previously been vacant.

She also noted two of her newest neighbors, a professor at Smith College and the other a public defender, on Mattoon Street. Each chose to live downtown after they were astonished by the quality and variety of the houses available and by the prices. "I think they represent a trend," Walch said. "There's a significant number of middle-class, mid-30s professionals who are coming back to live in the downtown area," she said. "It's a new urban thing."