

FROM THE FIELD

news, notes, and information

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Business Unusual

BY | DAN ENGLAND

CALL IT A TIPPING POINT, A PHENOMENON, A BUZZ. Whatever you call it, Fairfield is humming.

Consider this: Restaurants are thriving. Theater is alive and well. Two universities bestow a hip, literate vibe. And with its enviable location on the Sound and proximity to NYC via Metro North, rents and housing prices are far more reasonable than comparable neighborhoods down the line.

In the face of a recession that is having trouble getting over itself, how has Fairfield outsmarted the prevailing storm? Certainly one of the chief elements in bringing a frisson to Fairfield has been the opening of so many excellent restaurants. Marty Levine, owner of Martel, moved his operation from Westport to Fairfield. Since day one, the place has drawn patrons. "There is definitely a connection between what we see happening in Martel and what is happening in Fairfield generally," says Levine. Tommy Fabbraio, of Gray Goose in Southport, concurs: "We have been way more busy than our plan predicted." Greenhouse Grill on Unquowa Road has also jumped into the fray.

Smart planning is another reason for Fairfield's healthy growth in new businesses. The ambiance of the town center, the attractive expansion to the



THE SECRET
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west, with the Brick Walk and other developments, and building activity to the east—now picking up with a first-class hotel in Southport and a soon-to-be development across from Martel—has all been part of a “conscious strategy,” says First Selectman Ken Flatto. “The first thing we had to do was to turn around Fairfield Center in such a way that it retained its New England charm.”



“The Fairfield store is a concept store and one of the top 100 in the country,” says Trek shop owner Lisa Joaquim.

At the beginning of the transformation a few years ago, the town worked a deal with the owners of the critical stretch where Borders is to guarantee a certain level of rent for the essential parking garage behind it. At the same time, the town rejected a state-proposed parking structure by the train station that would have dominated the center of town.

“Along the way we were able to encourage the arts in Fairfield by supporting the Fairfield Theatre Company, the Fairfield

Arts Council, and the Community Theater,” Flatto adds.

Mark Barnhart and his economic-development team were instrumental in attracting business, resulting in a retail vacancy rate that is about half of any other town in the county. In 2009, the town bolstered six small businesses with micro-grants. Small touches, such as the banner project adminis-

tered by the Arts Council, add to the town’s lively energy. There’s even talk of a designated pedestrian walkway along the end of Sanford Street.

One notable development has been the Brick Walk. Ken Kleban and his father Al were intentional in both the look of the new buildings and the mix of tenants along this handsome row. “We worked with the town to maintain a look that was consistent with the rest of downtown,” Kleban says. “Frankly, ten years ago,

Fairfield Center was not so great a place.”

Lisa Joaquim, owner of Trek bicycles, was an early tenant of the complex. She had worked for Trek corporate helping find good store locations. “This Fairfield store is a ‘concept store’ and one of the top 100 stores in the country. I want to feel safe and I wanted a community where I could be an advocate for cycling. I found it all in Fairfield.”

At Island Outfitters, Kathy Fish is equally enthusiastic about Fairfield as a place to do business. “I love to see this happen in Fairfield.”

Many more elements go into making Fairfield a desirable place to live and work. There’s the exceptional local library, winner of the 2010 Connecticut Award for Excellence in Public Library Service; the strong school system; responsive police and fire departments; well-attended public meetings; cool skate park; beaches; more dogwoods than dogs; historic town green complete with a history museum; and new sports complex at the bottom of Mill Plain Road with yoga and an indoor climbing wall. And—Fairfield also boasts a World Series Little League team.

As Peter Guenther, Fairfield resident since 1995, put it, “When we moved here, the town was nothing like it is now. All of a sudden, it’s a destination.” It’s a really nice town, and it’s getting even nicer.



Got Nuts

IN 2004 Lori Sandler began Divvies—a bakery in South Salem that creates yummy treats without nuts, eggs, or dairy. Now she has created *Divvies*, a book with stories and recipes for yummy treats without those things either. Sandler didn’t start her life as a cook, but when she discovered that son Benjamin had severe food allergies, she wanted to make sure he could live a normal life. “Divvies believes eating and celebrating should always be a shared, inclusive experience,” she writes. “Not exclusive to those without food allergies.”

The *Divvies Bakery Cookbook* (St. Martin’s Press) is filled with fabulous stuff—key-lime squares, chocolate-chip cookies, corn muffins, strawberry bars, chocolate devil’s food cake, etc. In addition, it offers party advice, storage options, serving ideas, and more. It’s all good, so even if you don’t have the allergies, there is something for you.