



Mayor Dan Balice was the first signatory of a petition "Shop Downtown First" circulated by local churches and spearheaded by Jim Bennett of First Baptist Church.

# Shop local first

By EMMA PALOVA  
Sentinel-Standard writer

your local merchants first," Balice said.

IONIA — The newly refurbished downtown will reopen with festivities on Wednesday, Nov. 13. The Downtown Grand Reopening will showcase the fruits of the five-month improvement project and provide exposure to the local merchants.

City officials along with the chamber of commerce and the downtown development authority have been striving to attract a good mix of retail and restaurants.

Balice said if the awareness to shop locally is not raised, it may become a habit to go somewhere else.

"Obviously we're attempting to improve all facets of Ionia," mayor Dan Balice, said. "We need a good downtown to have a top rate town."

"At least try to find it in downtown Ionia first and if you can't get it here than go somewhere else," he said. "Our local merchants compete with good service and good quality. We want to let them know we're behind them."

Balice was also the first signatory of a petition "Shop Downtown First" circulated by the First Baptist Church of Ionia.

Balice said the city has invested \$10 million into

"You have some obligation to the community to support

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improvements in the last 10 years. The most recent \$2 million infrastructure project is slated for mid-December completion. It includes water, sewer, power and phone upgrades with a nice brickwork finishing touch.

The city also spent \$1 million for mapping of the utilities.

"We provide financial incentives for businesses," Balice said. "We're going to keep trying, we will be successful."

Pastor Jim Bennett of the First Baptist Church said the local merchants are the needy at the time.

"My hope is that people will follow through and support our merchants," Bennett said.

The petition will be circulated in area churches this Sunday and through Nov. 13. First Baptist Church will be open for the Nov. 13 city wide celebration. At the closing of the evening festivities the number of signatories will be announced.

Dawn Ketchum, executive director of the Ionia Area Chamber of Commerce, said the petition support of the merchants goes hand in hand with the chamber's efforts.

"It's a wonderful opportuni-

ty to put it in writing, your commitment to the community," Ketchum said.

Ketchum said the local merchants have not only suffered due to the street reconstruction, but also due to the slow economy and the lack of community support.

"It was a triple threat," Ketchum said, "but in the end the businesses fared well and they are still in operation."

During the city-wide celebration, merchants plan on putting 20 percent off sales.

There will be live entertainment on the streets provided by The Rydells, The Patin Trio, Resurrection Life Church and Dave, Doug and Brian. A magician and a palm reader from But Wait There's More will be browsing the streets. A sound system will be placed in the downtown area.

Ionia Dial-A-Ride will offer free trolley rides to the downtown area from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., and from 5 to 8 p.m. Advanced reservations necessary by calling 527-4000.

The highlight of the day will be a laser show at 6 p.m. in front of the theater. The show will be shot down Main Street going west.

"This is something new," Ketchum said. "It can be seen from 10 miles. We're looking at increasing the number of laser shows."

There may be two more shows at 7 p.m. and at 8 p.m.

The laser show is by Strictly FX of Chicago.

Part of the downtown business promotion will be a game for a free movie. Whoever obtains a total of 10 labels from local stores will get to see a free movie at the Ionia Theater.

Ketchum said the chamber will be consistently promoting the downtown.

The second annual hometown holiday giveaway will take place between Nov. 13 and Nov. 29. Anyone can stop at the local stores and drop an entry form into a canister at the participating stores. On Nov. 29, the winner will be announced for a gift certificate.

There will be an open house at the Armory, a ribbon cutting of the Main Street at 8:30 a.m., ribbon cutting at the Armory at 8:45 a.m. Refreshments will be served until 10 a.m. at the Armory and tours will be available all day long.

"The main purpose is to

bring excitement and activity to the downtown area,"

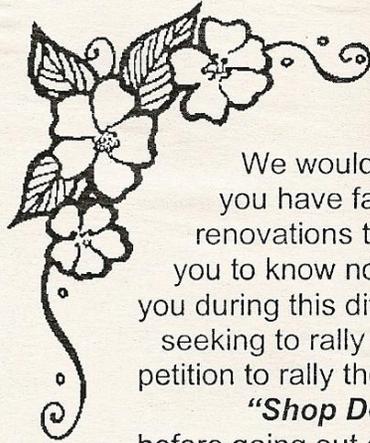
Ketchum said. "We want to celebrate the downtown project and its completion. We will continue to have events to bring families to expose businesses."

Ketchum said she is planning a winter downtown activity for February.

"We will have constant events revolving around the downtown area to bring people in," she said. "We're hoping that with the upcoming events people will be reminded what the local merchants have to offer. We want to reeducate the community on the importance of staying local with dollars and supporting local businesses."

"The petition drive is a wonderful opportunity to support our downtown businesses."

The festivities will last from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., sponsored by the city of Ionia, chamber of commerce and the downtown development authority.



Dear Merchant,

We would like you to know we recognize you have faced a financial burden with the renovations to the downtown area. We want you to know not only that our prayers are with you during this difficult time, but also that we are seeking to rally support for you by circulating a petition to rally those in our community to vow to ***“Shop Downtown First,”***

before going out of town for goods and services. It is our hope that with a little intentional effort we can show you that you do not face your burden alone!

—First Baptist Church of Ionia