

The Columbus Dispatch

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Main Street burning

Small towns, like Circleville, often struggle to recover and rebuild after blaze leaves gaping hole in historic downtown district

Sunday, September 28, 2008 3:38 AM

By [Mary Beth Lane](#)

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH



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The 1880s-era building that housed Mason's Furniture & Floor Coverings in downtown Circleville remains blocked off after last week's arson. It is unknown what will happen to the plot after the building is razed.



Richard Patrick, co-owner of Mason's Furniture, finds an old register in the ruins. He's unsure when -- or where -- he'll rebuild.

The community heart that beats in a historic downtown business district striving to stay alive breaks each time a fire destroys a building.

Small-town Main Street has a hard enough time competing with shopping malls without the affliction of fire and, often, demolition of the ruined building that leaves an empty lot along a street.

Circleville was the latest to lose a piece of its downtown heart last week. Mason's Furniture & Floor Coverings had been thriving in the Italianate-style American Hotel, which was built in the 1880s and closed in 1974.

Now, after a deliberately set fire Monday, it is a burned-out shell, its bricks streaked with soot and a flagpole leaning precariously from a remnant of roof. The adjoining Crist Building, circa 1896, was damaged and might be saved, but the hotel is a total loss and must be razed.

Richard Patrick, who owns the three-story building and fourth-generation business with his brother, Jim, doesn't know when -- or where -- he will rebuild. He worries more about neighboring businesses, many of which remain closed along a cordoned-off block of N. Court Street.

"I hope we can get this cleaned up and get the community back to normal," he said.

John Rankin, whose movie theater and restaurant were closed temporarily because of the fire, said it would be an understatement to describe his week as bad. His home burned Tuesday in an accidental fire while his businesses near Mason's Furniture were closed. He mourns the loss of his neighbor.

"The American Hotel contributed significantly to the way the town looks. It will change the landscape. When beautiful, old buildings burn down, you lose things that are impossible to replace," Rankin said.

Other central Ohio communities that are trying to preserve their historic downtowns have been through the same ordeal.

Some fires leveled buildings and left downtown streets dotted with dirt or gravel lots that have yet to be filled in. Other fires inspired city leaders and business owners to work harder to rescue their downtown. Some fires did both.

Lancaster's downtown lost two 19th-century brick buildings to fire last year, displacing four retail stores and leaving an empty lot on W. Main Street. Activity may be stirring, though. Two of the stores have reopened in other buildings. And Bill Smith, who owns Billy Crickets restaurant on Memorial Drive, bought the vacant lot and plans to put in a beer garden with live entertainment.

"Hopefully, we could generate some more street traffic for downtown, because that is what it needs," he said.

In January, the city paid \$200,000 for the nearby former Mithoff Hotel building, a long-time vacant eyesore, and is talking to local developer Leonard Gorsuch about redeveloping it.

Historic downtown Chillicothe is trying to redevelop itself after a 2003 fire gutted the Carlisle Building at Paint and Main streets. The brick landmark, owned by Columbus

investors, remains a fenced-in eyesore.

The downtown shuddered again in 2006 when a fire on E. 2nd Street destroyed two historic buildings that housed the box office and administrative offices of the Majestic Theater next door. The theater wasn't damaged, but the buildings were razed. The property owners have converted the space into rear parking and a front, wrought-iron-fenced "community courtyard" that now is used for summer performing-arts events and business get-togethers.

The Downtown Chillicothe Partnership, representing government, business and residents, meets monthly to continue work on the redevelopment recommendations of a consultant hired after the Carlisle fire, said Marvin Jones, president of the Chillicothe Ross Chamber of Commerce.

"I firmly believe that once the Carlisle is repaired and put back into use, revitalization will probably pick up steam," he said.

Short term, fires displace businesses and reduce revenue to a city. Long term, the impact can be worse.

Ideally, communities should save and rebuild their historic buildings after a fire or replace them with something new, said Jeff Siegler, director of revitalization for Heritage Ohio, a preservation group.

"What deteriorates downtown are buildings that come down and aren't replaced," he said. "You have a missing-tooth effect. It no longer has that nice, cohesive feel. It becomes less attractive, and people are less inclined to walk around a district like that."

It is more challenging to redevelop a tight urban space than a suburban field.

"Oh my gosh, yes," said Stephen Fowler, economic-development director in Newark, where a tavern fire more than a decade ago on the historic downtown Courthouse Square has left a "missing-tooth" lot. "Downtown land is different than building on suburban land. You may have to build upward. There can be access issues."

A 2001 fire that destroyed Arwebb Office Supply near the square left an empty lot, now used as a seasonal farmers' market. Neighboring land left empty by a previous fire was redeveloped into Candlewick Commons senior-citizen housing and a ground-floor McDonald's. That is a success story that Fowler would like to repeat.

Bun's Restaurant and Bakery in downtown Delaware closed after a 2002 fire but reopened in 2004, its signature neon sign on W. Winter Street pointing the way once more to the 19th-century fixture.

Dispatch reporter Randy Ludlow contributed to this story.

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