

Voice Column for November 2018

Downtown holiday festivities return – Family fun, from morning to night

By John Groh

Rockford area businesses already are making plans for Nov. 24, a day that promises to deliver a double dose of seasonal joy for the bottom line through Shop Small Saturday and the sixth annual Stroll on State.

Some downtown Rockford shopkeepers and restaurateurs tell me that the first Saturday after Thanksgiving is their favorite business day of the year, on top of being one of the most fun days for them personally.

Credit card giant American Express launched Small Business Saturday and the Shop Small movement in 2010 to encourage people to patronize local brick-and-mortar businesses. The movement caught on and it becomes more relevant every year to Rockford's downtown, as the number and variety of businesses keeps growing.

Meanwhile, Stroll on State – produced by RACVB and presented by Illinois Bank & Trust – gets better each year, and 2018 is no exception. Last year, residents and visitors came to the city center to shop, play and eat. Beyond the fun and excitement of the holiday activities, the day-long celebration is a gift that keeps on giving throughout the year to long-established businesses and new ones alike. Two businesses in the 300 block of East State Street illustrate the point.

At Capri Restaurant, a Grisanzio family business for more than five decades, events such as Stroll on State and City Market have proven to be a bonanza in new customers.

"We're lucky to have a loyal customer base and these events help us build on that," says Vita Grisanzio Jr., who manages the business with brother Mike for their parents, owners Janette and Vito. "The old perception was that downtown was so far out of the way for a lot of people, but these events have made it the place to go."

He welcomes competition from newer restaurants nearby, because, he says, "The more options people have, the more willing they are to come downtown. It's better for everybody."

Alicia and Eric Neubauer opened Ground Floor Skateboards a few buildings away less than two years ago, and they're already feeling the impact of Stroll and other special events.

"Stroll doesn't necessarily bring in more business right away – it might take three or four visits – but people are out and about and it gives them a chance to discover us," Alicia says.

The store offers skateboards from 30 companies around the world and everything else a person needs to start enjoying the sport. When Alicia talks about the persistence of skateboarders, her description seems applicable to the determination I've seen among successful businesses downtown.

She says: "Skateboarding really encourages perseverance and not giving up. You're going to fall down and you're going to get scraped up. You have to get back up on the board again to get that feeling of exhilaration."

Nothing defines that thrill for downtown businesses like Stroll on State, as they play host to tens of thousands of holiday revelers and potential customers. The fun starts at 8 a.m. with the Dasher Dash, a holiday-themed 5K through historic parts of downtown Rockford. Registration is required by Nov. 20 at www.runsignup.com.

The festivities continue throughout the day (starting at 2 p.m.) with an afternoon parade at 3 p.m. featuring five large character inflatables – up from three in 2017 – and additional floats and entertainment. Of course, there will be horse and wagon rides, hot chocolate and s'mores stations, ice sculpting, fabulous decorations and the tree-lighting ceremony. Santa and his reindeer will be on hand to hear children's Christmas wishes.

We're seeking volunteers to make the event run smoothly. Extra hands are needed for a variety of tasks, from decorating in advance to working on Stroll day to cleaning up after the event.

Your company could get in on the fun by sending a group of volunteers to help make the magic happen. Learn more at: www.strollonstate.com and look for the volunteer tab. See you at Stroll!

John Groh is president/CEO of Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. The mission of the RACVB is to drive quality of life and economic growth for our citizens through tourism marketing and destination development. www.gorockford.com

The views expressed are Groh's and do not necessarily represent those of the Rockford Chamber of Commerce.