

Downtown's future in capable hands

BCU's Eriksen empowered through success in Jackson

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The Enquirer

Take a tour of Jackson's city center with Kathleen Eriksen and you may be catching a glimpse of the future of downtown Battle Creek.

Eriksen spent the past 14 years rehabilitating, living in and promoting Jackson's central business district until Battle Creek Unlimited hired her 10 months ago.

While her mind is very much on the Cereal City, she is drawing on her experience in the Rose City as she works to revitalize Battle Creek's downtown.

Eriksen had a lot to do with the retail shops, brick pathways, park benches, bike racks, riverside farmers market, outdoor art and 1940s-era street lamps found in downtown Jackson, where she directed the downtown development authority for nearly five years.

Those amenities make downtown Jackson an inviting place.

Just how hands-on was Eriksen in her old job? She sketched the skyline image

IF YOU GO

■ **WHAT:** Unveiling of five-year plan for downtown Battle Creek by consultants HyettPalma.

■ **WHEN:** 7 to 8:30 p.m. Nov. 3.

■ **WHERE:** W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 1 E. Michigan Ave., downtown.

■ **WHY:** To hear the results of the surveys and interviews with Battle Creek residents and input from the September community vision session.

■ **WHO:** The public is invited to attend.



Downtown Battle Creek, as seen from the clock tower of First United Methodist Church on East Michigan Avenue, is the focus of revitalization efforts by Kathleen Eriksen, Battle Creek Unlimited's downtown maximization specialist.

ON THE NET

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that appears on banners lining Jackson's Michigan Avenue.

"Pretty amateurish, I guess," she said

of her drawing.

Not at all. The banners give people a visual of downtown Jackson and direct them to its shops, rehabbed buildings and second-floor loft apartments.

Now Eriksen is turning her attention — all of her attention — to downtown Cereal City. And it doesn't look as if she can be swayed off course.

PLEASE SEE **ERIKSEN, 7A**

Eriksen draws on experience to shape downtown

ERIKSEN, FROM 1A

"She lives it, eats it, sleeps it ... She is really into it because she wants to succeed," said Rita DeVore, owner of Shrank's Cafeteria & Catering Co., a longtime downtown Battle Creek restaurant.

DeVore is right. Eriksen and her 7-year-old son, Robert, and her dog, Buddy, often are seen walking the linear path near downtown or having breakfast Saturday morning at Griffin Grill & Pub on West Michigan Avenue.

"It's in my blood. I love downtowns," Eriksen said. "If you do something you are passionate about, success comes naturally. I have a vision, and I'm not going to give up until it happens."

When they arrived in Battle Creek, the Eriksens lived in a second-floor loft near downtown. They recently relocated to an apartment on the edge of Battle Creek, but that is only until Eriksen can arrange for second-floor rehabbed apartment space downtown, which she sees as critical to her efforts.

"The thing that's going to turn this downtown around is a tremendous boom in residential living," she said. "And really cool marketing."

The downtown needs to be marketed, she said, as a place with "a uniqueness, an energy, a vibe that you can't get in a strip mall."

The confidence comes partly from the success she had in Jackson. In the late 1980s, she

ABOUT ERIKSEN

■ **WHO:** Kathleen Eriksen.

■ **AGE:** 36.

■ **JOB:** Downtown maximization specialist for Battle Creek Unlimited.

■ **HOMETOWN:** Jackson native; now lives in Battle Creek.

■ **EXPERIENCE:** Was executive director of Jackson's downtown development authority before taking the BCU job 10 months ago. Also owned three businesses in downtown Jackson.

■ **EDUCATION:** Bachelor's degree in management and organizational development from Spring Arbor University near Jackson.

ful businesses with second-floor living space. They also owned a third business downtown.

"We said we'd do it for five years, and we did it for 10," she said. "That was a nice piece of my life."

Jackson resident Dave Weath-

erwax, a musician who plays in downtown Battle Creek and remembers when Eriksen and her brother opened Orello's Ristorante in downtown Jackson.

"They were provocative and cosmopolitan and worldly," Weatherwax said. "A lot of people would say you can't do this in Jackson, but right away they had standing room only and reservations. She knew Jackson was ready for a move upward."

Could she have similar success in downtown Battle Creek? "She is someone with a sense of what could be," Weatherwax said. "That's what she has."

In addition to starting her own businesses in Jackson, Eriksen helped attract new shops as DDA director.

A retail recruitment seminar for downtown Jackson was attended by 260 people. Within three months, 10 new businesses had opened in the city center, including a deli, bar, candle shop, record store and a bank

FIVE-YEAR PLAN

Eriksen is nearing a year on the job at BCU, the city's economic development group. The to-do list is long, but she has hit the ground running.

A few items already crossed off: winning a "Blueprints for Michigan Downtowns" state grant; building a database of 1,000 people connected to or interested in downtown; starting a quarterly newsletter about downtown for the public and a monthly bulletin for the BCU board; launching Operation Clean Sweep to keep downtown clean; assessing the area's office, retail and living space; and holding the recent vision event attended by 300 people to get community input.

"Did you know there are 20 restaurants in downtown Battle Creek?" Eriksen asked. "A lot of people don't know that."

She also is getting to know downtown business and property owners and helping them

with everything from adding signs to improving building facades to passing city inspections. So far, it seems, she is earning their trust.

"She's young and hip and has got some real progressive ideas," said DeVore. "She's hands-on and aggressive. She has a nice rapport with everyone. I don't know any business owner who doesn't find her easy to work with."

Randy Case, who owns a business and property downtown, is working with Eriksen to take pictures of building facades to document downtown's "before and after" look.

"I think she's pretty dynamic," Case said. "She gets out and talks to the people and is out there getting ideas. You can't do this kind of work behind a desk." She doesn't. Eriksen said she usually walks up and down Michigan Avenue every day, getting to know business and property owners.

The walks also downtown's unutilized 50 percent of the space in Battle Creek business district.

She sees opportunity in about a mor plan to fill the businesses and unveiled, based from the commission held in September as surveys and conducted by BCU sultants HyettPal

People such as Cafe owner Don be watching to pens. He has a lot of his downtown c also has a lot of Eriksen.

"I love her," "Thank God she's her eye on the be is going to waylay Jenny Rode cover can be reached c jrode@battlecr.g