

Downtown **Sarasota** copes with dust

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Mark Woodruff is confident all the upscale condominiums, shops and offices coming downtown will be a boon to his family's business - - eventually.

But until the construction dust settles, the general manager of the popular Two Senioritas restaurant on Main Street says he'll be fighting to keep business up.

During the past several months, construction of the 16-story Plaza at Five Points at Main and Pineapple Avenue has caused detours and disruption.

More recently, work on the 17-story 1350 Main St. condo tower right across the street has cost Two Senioritas 10 parking spaces, in a downtown where places to leave a car on Saturday nights have become as valuable as water in Death Valley.

Then came the telephone outage.

After a contractor driving pilings at 1350 Main severed a pair of cables May 10, telephone customers around Palm Avenue and Main Street found themselves without service.

Some of the 3,000 Verizon customers affected were without telephones for three days.

For Two Senioritas, the lack of service meant the restaurant couldn't process credit card purchases. Customers either had to pay cash or go elsewhere. Many chose the latter.

"I know the new buildings will be good for business in the long run, but right now, frankly, it's a pain in the butt," Woodruff said.

"If we were a new business, this could have been absolutely devastating," said Charles Githler III, chairman of InterShow, a financial seminar company on Palm Avenue that was also without phones for three days.

Straining patience

Woodruff can take consolation in the fact that he's not alone.

Months of noisy construction -- and years more in the offing -- have strained downtown merchants' patience, frustrated customers unable to locate parking, and left city officials grasping for solutions.

"It's become a daily problem," said Pam Kantor, whose Chasen Reed home decor and accessories shop at Palm Avenue and Main Street has seen its business shrink by about 50 percent since January.

"We were sitting in April where we usually are in August," said Kantor, whose store has been open five years. "People are not coming downtown. They're telling us they're driving around three times, unable to park, and leaving."

Kantor also blames the construction for the drop in business, as well as the 160 parking spaces lost to the 1350 Main St. work.

She complains about the dust, the torn up streets, and the sewer lines being replaced. Coinciding with the 1350 Main St. improvements, her landlord has erected scaffolding around her entrance.

Nearby, at Sarasota News & Books, co-owner Caren Lobo's cafe business has taken a hit as well. She also laments the lack of parking.

"It's huge, and it's becoming a tsunami in regards to urgency," said Lobo, whose store opened in October 1997.

Rather than blame 1350 Main St.'s developers, a team led by Christopher Brown, Lobo and others say the city is at fault for failing to build needed garages and other infrastructure.

"We're working to hold the city accountable for the promises they've made," said Lobo, adding she was told by city officials eight years ago that a garage in that area was "imminent."

As part of the Downtown Master Plan 2020 in January 2001, the city pledged to develop a number of downtown parking garages. Since then, only one -- offering 150 public spaces -- has opened.

"They knew this was coming several years ago," Lobo said. "I think the city is largely in denial about the state of crisis that we're in now."

City officials say they are sensitive to the merchants' frustrations and the challenges that go along with the downtown construction.

"The city realizes there's a lot of construction activity, and there's been detours and some parking spaces lost," said Alex Davis-Shaw, Sarasota's deputy city engineer. "We're trying to mitigate the impacts of construction."

To that end, the city has begun holding weekly meetings on Thursday mornings to listen to merchant complaints and offer potential solutions. It has also taken out newspaper advertisements with maps showing various parking spots downtown.

When the Whole Foods Market Centre and new SCAT bus station were under construction at Lemon Avenue and First Street, the city leased land on Orange Avenue and ran a trolley back and forth for displaced parkers.

"It's an inconvenience, definitely," Davis-Shaw said. "And we understand that this is not starting and finishing in a short time frame."

More on the way

Even more disconcerting to merchants, more downtown construction is probable.

City officials still expect a Houston developer to build a scaled-down Plaza Verdi on land behind News & Books and Two Senioritas, plans are being drawn for condos at 1301 Main, and Isaac Group Holdings has proposed a massive redevelopment that would add retail shops, residences and parking along State Street and Pineapple Avenue.

Although both Isaac Group's Pineapple Square and Plaza Verdi would eventually increase parking, spaces would be lost during construction.

"Small retail businesses don't have the resources to hold out for years," Kantor said.

Chasen Reed, which will be dealing with 1350 Main St.'s construction for the next two years, decided to hold an "end of season" sale a month earlier than normal.

For unauthorized work that led to the cable cutting, Verizon intends to bill 1350 Main St. general contractor Kraft Construction a "pretty significant sum," Verizon spokesman Bob Elek said.

Kraft, meanwhile, has apologized for the telephone service loss caused by one of its subcontractors.

"We apologize for any inconvenience the accident caused," said Stan Byers, 1350 Main's lead project manager.

Thirteen Fifty developer Christopher Brown did not return a telephone call for comment.

Mark Woodruff's construction-related problems don't seem to be abating. In addition to the drilling din that's forced him to keep Two Senioritas' doors closed, he's battling a "sewer gas" odor that sometimes permeates the restaurant.

So far, he's spent \$1,000 on plumbers who've been unable to diagnose the problem.

Sarasota News & Books has focused its efforts on outside book sales to counter traffic loss at the store, Lobo said.

"We'll get through it. But unfortunately, I think we'll see a number of businesses fail before this is all over."