Main Street ain’t what it used to be

The changing face of downtown

Downtown Bozeman Association president Chris Pope sweeps the sidewalk in front of his toy store on Main Street Saturday morning. Pope says he hopes national franchises do not move into Bozeman’s downtown and change the defining character of the shops.

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The only constant is change.
Until last week, the Bungalow Drug on Bozeman’s main street managed — in some form — to defy that law for 64 years. It changed owners, it changed its face, but it was always the Bungalow Drug. Then the rent more than doubled. By mid-September, one of Main Street’s oldest businesses will shut its doors and be replaced by...

Who knows?

Landlord Dave Brekke says he doesn’t have a tenant to fill the spot yet.

The departure of the Bungalow and who will occupy its space in the future is symbolic of the entire downtown. Old businesses are leaving, but what the new Main Street will look like is open to increasingly anxious speculation.

Will downtown lose is character of locally owned businesses? Will it cater so heavily to tourists, it will be avoided by the locals?

“My biggest concern personally is if we start seeing the national franchises, Eddie Bauer, Lord and Taylor’s and the Disney’s of the world start moving in,” said Chris Pope, president of the Downtown Bozeman Association which claims several hundred members.

“Then we would really lose some of the character that defines downtown,” Pope said, who also owns the Great Rocky Mountain Toy Co. on Main Street.

That character may be roughly defined by Fred Decker, owner of Music Villa and the building it’s occupied since 1982.

“I think downtown has some real individuality. It is not owned by a bunch of out-of-state corporations and in most stores on Main Street you can walk in and find the

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people who own it are actually working there,” Decker said.

But what if the big, high-end franchises did roll into downtown? The nearest answers are found in Jackson Hole, Wyo., a small resort town in the shadow of the Tetons.

National franchise outlets such as Ralph Lauren, J Crew, London Fog, Orvis and Pendleton proliferated in downtown Jackson, said Jerry De France, owner of the Pink Corral and the Upper Corral, a combination gift and art shop in Jackson.

“For the most part they replaced homegrown mom and pop-type businesses,” De France said, who has owned the corrals for 11 years.

“The flavor has changed. It has been my experience that managers of chain stores don’t volunteer like local business owners do,” De France said.

De France’s observations echo those of Dave Landis, vice president of marketing for Jackson State Bank.

“The concern raised in conversation is that the big chains will take the money and ship it back to the corporate office,” Landis said.

“The mom and pop stores kept the money in the community.”

But the big franchises haven’t come to Bozeman and generally business owners are positive about Main Street.

“I think some people are thinking Bozeman will be the next Jackson Hole, but I don’t see that happening,” said Mary Jane DiSanti, owner of the Country Bookshelf for 20 years. DiSanti also owns the space her store occupies.

In the next few years, some businesses on Main Street may move on because of unreasonably high rents, DiSanti said. But generally, enough businesses own their own space and are committed to downtown that it should remain much the same, she said.

But should downtown start loosening its diversity of stores that cater to both the local and the tourist, there are no plans to deal with it.

“The question is what can be done that would retain that balance, and to be quite honest we have not come to any specific proposals on how to do that yet,” said Keith Swenson, a professional planner who sits on the downtown improvement steering committee appointed by the Downtown Bozeman Association.

But other cities have implemented programs to guide their downtowns through rapid growth, said Mac Nichols, senior program manager for the National Main Street Center in Washington, D.C.

The Main Street Center is a program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation which helps communities with both downtown and commercial revitalization.

Other cities have non-profit groups offering store owners short-term subsidies to weather high rents until they can revamp their business, Nichols said.

Along with the subsidies educational programs are offered.

“Sometimes all a shopkeeper needs is a little education on new business practices to make their store perform at a higher level,” Nichols said, who recommends a diverse collection of businesses for downtowns.

“If the market appeal of your downtown becomes too narrow, then you open the possibility for shopping centers to take that market away from you,” he said.