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The window at Staats Jewelers is decorated for the holiday season. Staats is one of many businesses located in the downtown business district now known as The Rock.

By RACHEL COLEMAN

Leader & Times

The approach of Christmas means it's time to shop for gifts, and a new initiative by local businesses aims to keep Liberal in the forefront of shopper's minds. Several downtown shops have banded together to form "The Rock," an informal group designed to remind people what started it all.



Traditionally, downtown was the heart of local business, noted Leader&Times owner and publisher Earl Watt, whose newspaper office sits at the south end of downtown proper. Between the brisk railroad traffic streaming through the Rock Island Depot, and the many "Mom and Pop" businesses on Kansas Avenue, downtown was the foundation of local business.

"So, calling it 'The Rock' is fitting," Watt noted. The name also recognizes the downtown's historic connection to rail which was instrumental in establishing Liberal.

"We kind of got in on the ground floor of this idea," said Yippee Yi Yea owner Max Carlson. "Everybody downtown has got good ideas, but sometimes it's hard to follow through. I think this will help."

Now that the Chamber of Commerce-sponsored Holiday Open House shopping event has passed, "The Rock" participants are brainstorming new ideas to keep the momentum going. Several have committed to longer business hours during the holiday season, and will stay open late on Thursdays following the Thanksgiving weekend.



They have also decided to "Rock On" after the Christmas Parade Dec. 7 by staying open late with some special offers.

At the Liberal Chamber of Commerce, director Rozelle Webb said the downtown businesses

are on the right track, at the right time.

"I would say I'm looking for Christmas shopping to be above normal this year," she said. "It's already shaping up to be a good shopping season." With downtown business owners getting together and trying to do some different things to draw in shoppers, Webb said, "it should be even more interesting. It revitalizes the area, which is where the Chamber office is located. So we see it up close."

Webb noted that the Chamber promotes all local businesses throughout Liberal, and welcomes any effort that keeps people shopping within city limits.

"It would be great to see other neighborhoods around town try something like this," she said. "We're very excited."

Liberal's next major holiday event will be the annual Christmas parade, sponsored by the Leader&Times. Although the parade embraces all local businesses, downtown business is literally at the heart of the event scheduled for Dec. 7.

The "Tinsel & Tread" parade will wrap up on Main Street, near the Landmark Building fountain. Along with the drawing for the much-coveted, brand-new Ford Focus that's been on display all over Liberal for the last month, the event will feature live entertainment, food vendors and drawings. "The Rock" plans to keep the fun going even after the floats and Ford Focus have gone their way.

"We're talking about staying open later, doing some special giveaways, sponsoring some special musical entertainment," Carlson said. "Once people are out for the evening, they might as well stay and enjoy themselves."

In Carlson's shop, the theme is "one of a kind, eclectic stuff, starting with Western art and Southwestern decor," he said. With a longtime trade in picture framing, Carlson saw the local trend toward cowboy themes, and decided to expand on it.

"We thought it would complement the framing work," he said. Thus, Yippee Yi Yea offers an array of items, from infant-sized Western novelty clothes to Mexican folk art, jewelry and purses, and items for the home. Carlson said a smart shopper could easily find a unique gift with local flavor for anywhere from \$20 to \$100.

Many of The Rock's stores have unique offerings that cannot be found elsewhere, making the gift-giving season special by providing that special someone with an item that is truly original.

The Rock businesses and merchants are also working on a downtown sound system as well as making plans to have more events in the heart of Liberal's shopping district, giving the community more than just a unique shopping experience but a destination for activities.

"People will start to think about downtown differently," Watt said. "These people are working together to create a special shopping experience with an atmosphere that will be inviting and will tie the entire area together. It's gonna rock!"

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