

“Third Thursdays Gives New Life To Main, Peabody”

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Tom Shelton was having a tough time engaging younger customers in his two South Main Street clothing stores before the neighborhood turned shopping into one big party.

“I think this new generation grew up in the mall and they don’t know the experience they can get walking in and having the owner of the store wait on them,” said Shelton, owner of Shelton Clothiers and Christine by Shelton Clothier. “A lot of younger people are taken aback when I approach them. They’re not used to it.”

But three years ago, Shelton and the neighboring businesses on the block of Main at Peabody Place decided to follow the lead of the South Main Historic Arts District’s Friday Art Trolley Tour and Cooper-Young’s Cooper-Young Night Out by creating a monthly block party, which seems to have earned them a place on the map.

“We call ourselves the north end of the south end,” said Shelton.

The event, known as Third Thursdays at Main and Peabody, now offers multiple music venues, food, drink and retail specials, and a casual block party-style atmosphere that draws in new and repeat customers alike.

“Everyone on this block is an active owner,” said Deni Reilly, who owns The Majestic Grille with her husband, Patrick. “We came together to form some cohesive marketing. We all share parking lots and an identity so we wanted to come up with some creative ideas to brand our block.”

Reilly, who has taken on a good deal of leadership in setting up the monthly parties, explained that there is no formal organization behind the effort, though participating business owners signed a pledge to work together.

“We are all small businesses so it’s hard for us to do advertising,” she said. “(With the block parties) you don’t have to say ‘I want to go to one place.’ It’s, ‘I want to go to Main and Peabody because I can go into Circa for a cocktail, I can get an appetizer at Majestic Grille, I can get sushi, I can pick up a present, I can stroll the art museum,’ – there’s really everything.”

Business owners typically bring refreshments and their wares out to the street for passers-by to peruse.

Many of the business owners, including Shelton and Reilly, are members of the South Main Association, but both say that there is room for some distinction between the Main and Peabody area and the core of South Main.

“For our (mailing) purposes I never spell out South Main,” said Reilly. “We’re proud members of the South Main Association and we’re very active, but it is a different thing and people get confused.”

“We used to be open for the Trolley Tour,” said Shelton. “It was successful for a long time, but really the focus is on the street south of Linden. We decided to participate down there more and have our own event at a different time.”

Trolley Tours are held on the last Friday of the month. Cooper-Young Night Out is the first Thursday of each month.

At Main and Peabody, participating businesses also contribute monetarily on a sliding scale according to size, and some offer services as contributions. Brian Paris of the Center for Southern Folklore, for example, handles bookings and set-up for the bands that play for the parties.

“We have at least two different genres going on at the same time, so if you have a jug band playing at the Center, a jazz band might be playing in front of the Majestic, and maybe a blues band further down,” said Paris.

This month features the jazz/funk group Tempeh Four and the Ghost Town Blues Band, playing from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

This year block parties have been held each month since March and the businesses are thinking of extending it by one hour to 8:30.

“If you can create foot traffic and a pattern of attendance, (block parties) may not pay off the first time you do it, but you get people to develop habits and overcome any obstacles of coming to the location,” said Eric Christopherson, creative director of the marketing/design firm Combustion.

“It’s comfortable, there’s no pressure, you’re not being drawn into a store for a sale. You’re going for a casual, entertaining exploration experience and if you feel good about being there, you’ll come back.”

The block parties rely heavily on social media to get the word out. Reilly assigned her own event manager to create a media template for businesses to distribute and create “flash mob” events on Twitter like this month’s “Beat the Heat” flash mob in which visitors are invited to squirt each other with water guns at 6:45 p.m. when Buster Poindexter’s “Hot, Hot, Hot” is played outside The Majestic Grille.

“Unarmed people are off limits and it’s over when the song finishes,” Reilly said. “We’ve gotten to the point where we see the same families coming down and meeting grandma and grandpa, a lot of them specifically coming down for the parties.”