Local Businesses Hit Hard, Recovering As State Reopens
by Kate and Calvin Holtrop

Illustration by Calvin & Collin Holtrop

In late March, Governor Whitmer closed Michigan’s economy due to concerns of spreading COVID-19. Businesses in Muskegon County and the Fruitport area were affected by the statewide shutdown. Many of our small businesses closed their doors or changed their routines to minimize gatherings where coronavirus might spread.

Business owners and managers at The Lakes Mall shared some of the difficulties they have faced, including lost revenues, lost traffic, and lost business opportunities. Corine Rose, owner of Corine’s Cakes & Catering, reported having to limit her menu and drop catering services for weddings and open house events.

Bill Wheaton, who co-manages Gold Recyclers with Jolene Hittle, commented on the fact that customer traffic has doubled significantly. “People are hesitant to spend money they might need,” he said.

January and February were our best months yet, with sales numbers above average,” said Dan Light, owner of Your Plate or Mine. “And when the pandemic reached our area and we were forced to shut down, we were left to completely rebuild sales when we reopened in June, starting from the bottom up.”

Businesses along 3rd Street in the Village of Fruitport have also been hard hit. Staff members of Nails by Miss Thai say the pandemic and consequent shutdown prevented them from finishing renovations needed for them to open their new shop.

Howver, some businesses have had better experiences. Third Street stores, Waypoint Dock and Spirits, roughly doubled its business over this time. Also, after The Lakes Mall reopened, business picked up quickly for Makemona Rickerson, owner of The Lost Ones Treasures. “I was able to move to a bigger location and get cheaper rent,” Rickerson said. “And also the mall opened back up, there was a large boost in sales and overall money flowing in the mall to, like, two [to] three times what was expected.”

As reopening moves forward, local businesses have adapted, creating innovative solutions to deal with COVID-19 concerns, such as virus transmission and the safety of customers and employees.

Shops at the mall are adjusting business practices to limit contact with customers and to promote mask-wearing and social distancing. Sneeze shields are in place at many cash registers, and some businesses are keeping some of their doors locked to encourage customers to wear masks before entering.

Silver & Gifts, co-owned by Lila Rinehart and Bill Wheaton, has reopened next door to Gold Recyclers. Lila is increasing her store’s online presence and thinking about delivering gifts, in addition to mailing gift and jewelry orders. She has also increased cleaning routines and arranged her work space, where she makes gift baskets, to minimize exposure to customers, while preserving her shop’s bright and cheery atmosphere. “I have made it a point to make sure people feel welcome and comfortable when they are here, simply because I know that our world is so secluded and, at times, lonely, and I don’t want to add to that,” Rinehart said.

Corine’s Cakes and Catering has moved to doing their own deliveries and using curbside pick-up for customers who order out, to serve their mouthwatering meals with as little contact as possible.

Dan Light has expanded his To-Go pottery painting service at Your Plate or Mine. “This was previously limited to churches and schools for large group events, but it has been beneficial to offer this service to the general public,” he said.

In the Village of Fruitport, many businesses have limited the days in which they are open, and have restricted visits to appointments only. They are also requiring masks to be worn indoors. Preventative measures, combined with the low rate of COVID-19 infection in Muskegon County and Fruitport, continue to offer encouraging signs for the local economy.

Since the shutdown in March, businesses in Fruitport have lost valuable time and income. Business owners have had to change routines for the present, but they are hopeful that a return to normal will not be far away. So, despite hard spring and summer seasons, many businesses have still been able to reopen as the state opens up, and many still have a good outlook on the future as the economy rebounds.