

SKIP DICKSTEIN/TIMES UNION

GUY SEMENTILLI, president of the Upper Union Business Improvement District, stands in front of his restaurant, Scott's on Upper Union Street in Schenectady. Sementilli and other BID members are trying to recruit new businesses to the area.

Upper Union Street WANTS YOU

A call goes out for new businesses to join the lively retail area

BY CATHY WOODRUFF
 BUSINESS WRITER

SCHENECTADY — If you're an aspiring small-business person with a knack for baking bread, scrambling up a tasty breakfast or picking good books, the neighborhoods around Upper Union Street have a warm welcome ready for you.

If you're also handy with a waffle cone and an ice cream scoop, so much the better.

In something like the business equivalent of a sorority or fraternity rush, members of the Upper Union Street Business Improvement District have launched a recruitment campaign to draw enterprising new sisters and brothers to the lively retail corridor.

A survey completed in September for the BID by Siena Research Institute identified a bread bakery, coffee shop or brunch restaurant, book store and ice cream shop as the most sought after additions to the shopping area — with all mentioned by more than half the people surveyed.

The eastern stretch of Union Street running to the Niskayuna town line already is home to more than 60 stores,

restaurants, banks and other businesses such as dry cleaners and salons, most of them locally owned.

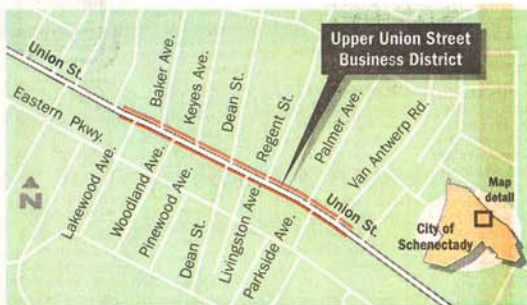
Many — Gershon's Delicatessen, Simon's Men's Wear and Northeastern Fine Jewelry, to name a few — have been there for decades.

"It's a nice collection of businesses," said BID President Guy Sementilli, who purchased Scott's Restaurant with his mother, Vincenza, 14 years ago and grew up delivering newspapers in the neighborhood. "We all feed off each other in a variety of ways."

Even so, Sementilli said, BID members are eager to have more company. "I hate to see an empty storefront," he said.

The Upper Union Street BID Web site currently lists 11 buildings with available space. Most are on Union, and a handful are on side streets: Baker, Dean and Keyes.

Identifying just what sorts of businesses customers wanted to see added was one of the first steps in the BID's recruitment campaign, so it was among the topics included in the Siena Research



TYSWAN STEWART/TIMES UNION

survey conducted by telephone over two weeks in September.

The responses largely confirmed what BID members already suspected, said Anne Savage of River Street Planning & Development in Troy, a consultant to the BID.

"That was reassuring, to know that our perceptions of what Upper Union Street needs match pretty closely with the per-

ceptions the customers have," she said.

The poll-takers called residents in towns as far east as the Hudson River and west to Amsterdam in Montgomery County. And the findings offered an abundance of encouraging news for the BID, Savage said.

In the immediate area of the district, 90 percent of those surveyed said they

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had visited Upper Union Street in the past year — often many times.

“The folks in the central area use (the shopping district) all the time for everything,” Savage said. Even in the broader survey area, still within easy driving distance, 72 percent said they had visited Upper Union in the last year.

Also among the findings:

■ 82 percent said they shop on Upper Union because they like doing business with local owners.

■ 68 percent said they come to Upper Union for its “small town character.”

“We have such a solid base of well-established businesses,” said Sementilli, adding that “99 percent of these businesses are owner-operated, and a mall can’t give you that.”

In recent years, 18 BID businesses, including Scotti’s, have gotten fresh faces with help from the Schenectady Metroplex Development Authority, Sementilli noted. Metroplex has provided more than \$650,000 in grants to supplement more than \$850,000 in owner investments on new facades.

The first and best-known focus for Metroplex, which is funded with a portion of county sales tax revenue, was downtown, which has added office buildings, restaurants, stores, a movie theater and many other businesses since the authority was created 10 years ago.

But the Metroplex mission also includes revitalizing other sections of the city and surrounding communities in Schenectady County.

“I don’t think it’s about competition,” he said. “You can’t draw walls around areas and get into protectionism.”

Rather, he said, “more is better. Some people question that, but it’s true. If Upper Union Street does well, it helps everybody.”

Surveys and studies cited by the BID show that Union Street is a major gateway to the city, with an average daily traffic count of some 10,600 cars.

Neighborhood income statistics confirm that it’s a relatively affluent portion of the region, and the street is a frequent destination for Union College students, adding a dose of youth to the mix of customers.

“We are considered ‘downtown Niskayuna’ here,” Sementilli said, noting that the street is an easy walk from homes in the town’s old section.

Sementilli expects an announcement soon about a new coffee shop, which he predicts will be a quick hit with hundreds of potential customers who pour out of nearby churches every Sunday, college students and professionals seeking a breakfast meeting spot.

He acknowledges that the economy makes opening a new business a more daunting prospect than a few months ago, but he says potential newcomers can take heart from the success of those already here.

“There are so many staples on this street who have been on this street for years,” he said. “It tells you that on Upper Union Street, we’re doing something right up