

Business/Real Estate

'Twas the season Christmas sales started slowly but it could be a record year

By MARY LOUISE BIRKS
Times staff writer

When the last weary shopper headed home Christmas Eve and the cash registers had ceased to beep-beep, most retail merchants in Mississauga closed up shop knowing their seasonal sales figures were on par — or better — than last year.

Four plaza managers in Mississauga polled by The Times when there was four shopping days to go agreed that Christmas sales had a slow beginning this year, but built to the seasonal norm about two weeks before Christmas.

Peter McCallion, manager of Westdale Mall, credited the first snowfall with finally bringing out the shoppers.

"When the weather turns cold, here's a feeling of Christmas that induces shopping," he said.

Last year at Westdale Mall Christmas shoppers converged on the mall early November. "But by the end of the month the early Christmas buying had bottomed out and didn't pick up until two weeks before Christmas," said McCallion.

McCallion said there was more discounting before Christmas at Westdale Mall than there was last year. "Because the season's been slow to start, for the first time some stores have been discounting before Christmas," he said.

Norm Kiernander, promotions director at Rockwood Mall, blamed the economy for the last minute shopping crunch. "With the economy having taken a funny trend in the past year, people tend to hang onto their money until the last possible moment," said Kiernander, who described shopping activity at the mall two weeks before Christmas as "just crazy".

In an effort to draw potential

Christmas shoppers to Rockwood Mall early in the season, the management sponsored a crafts show in late November. "That's something we ordinarily wouldn't do, but we hoped to bring in a different crowd and it worked like a charm," said Kiernander. "We had our best week in November that week."

In the longrun a mall's biggest drawing card is its choice of stores and the convenience of one temperature all-year-round shopping, he said.

Nance Lemieux, promotions director at Square One, said stores in the centre did "very well", if not, "better than last year."

The recent snowfall had a big effect on the number of shoppers at Square One.

"When it snows and grows colder, people start to think more about Christmas," said Lemieux. "Last Saturday Dec. 15 was incredible — I think the best in the mall's history. There was wall-to-wall people. It was so busy all the parking spaces were full, including the available parking in the nearby buildings. People were even parking in the fields."

Lemieux said there's nothing usual about pre-Christmas sales, they're just a sign of the times. "It's the age of sales before Christmas," she said. "It might have been unusual in the past, but it began in a small way last year and I think it will be a common occurrence in the future."

Since many of the stores at Square One are chain stores, their sales are chainwide and not indicative of how well a store is really doing, said Lemieux.

Peter Leroux, manager of Sheridan Mall, has noticed a decline in the numbers of shoppers, although he

said stores in the mall "seem to be doing as well as last year."

"Maybe there's not as many browsers," he added.

Leroux agreed sales were slow until the first snowfall. He theorized with more people using Chargex and Mastercharge cards, the public waited until after mid-December to make their Christmas purchases because there's a good chance they won't be billed on those purchases for another two months.

Last year Christmas sales peaked about two weeks before Christmas, leading Leroux to theorize the public waited to take advantage of the same thing this year.

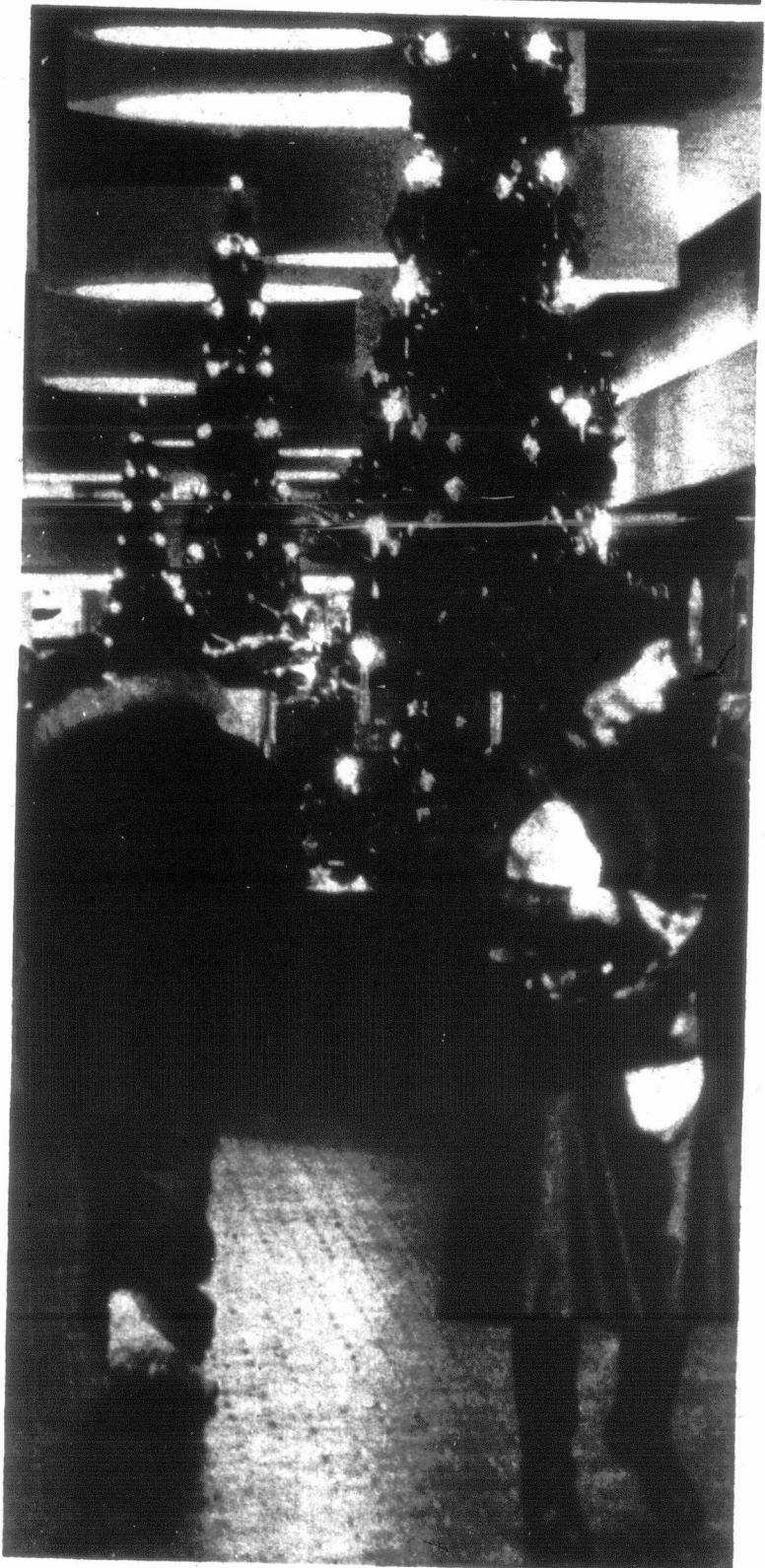
The problem is most smaller stores can't afford to move their stock with pre-Christmas sales, said Leroux, who didn't expect large scale pre-Christmas sales to materialize. "It's true the major chain stores are having sales, but not as big as they were last year," he said.

Shoppers' habits have changed and that's contributed to the last-minute rush as well. "Shoppers are more conscious of price these days," said Leroux. "I don't think there's as much impulse-buying as before. A lot more thought goes into a purchase today."

He's confident stores at Sheridan Mall are doing "alright."

"Each year some stores do better than others," said Leroux. "Each year there's a hot seller. One year it's avocado kitchenware and another year it's digital clock radios and the stores that carry those items do well. I don't know what this year's big saving is — unless it's saving."

And if sales are down, Leroux would argue it's because people are keeping a tighter hold on their purse strings.



They came, they saw, they shopped

A business going according to plan

By JOHN STEWART
Times staff writer

Reg Davidson was asked by a politician last week why he hasn't been before council since the new planning consulting company of Davidson-Belford was formed.

The 36-year-old planner replied that if he was doing his job properly, council would rarely be seeing him anymore.

"Time is money in the consulting business," says Davidson. "You may get your draft approval of a subdivision very quickly, but if any major problems have been glossed over, they'll show up at the stage where you go to register the land. It all keys on how well the project was put together initially." When a project does "blow up" at the registration stage, that's when council usually receives a deputation from a planning consultant.

Davidson started working for the

township of Toronto at the age of 17 when it had a planning staff of eight people, about a fifth of the present staff. He worked for the municipality for 11 years and has since worked for himself and for planning consultants Montague Pound and Associates.

His partner, Dick Belford, also knows his way around city hall, having worked there for 10 years. He was once the development coordinator dealing with the final processing of plans.

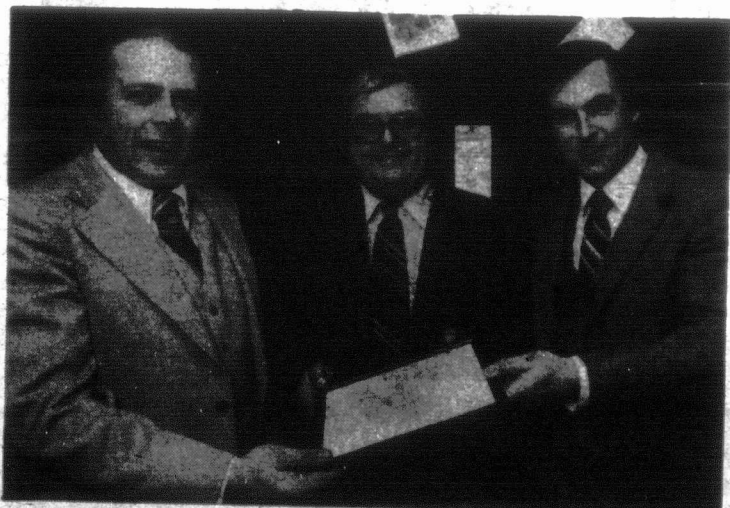
Davidson-Belford says it has an advantage in its field because of its good working relationship with city and regional staff. The company also provides a service which will see a project through from the initial stages of design, which is Davidson's specialty, to the point where building permits are made available by the city.

A good planning consultant is a

trouble-shooter who can resolve problems with staff in the processing stages, says Davidson. Although the bureaucratic process is "mind-boggling" to the uninitiated, the red tape can be cut by those with skill, the planners say.

Belford says the company was hoping to acquire about 25 clients between its opening in October and Christmas. Despite setbacks caused by a Bell Telephone strike, difficulties in remodelling the single family house at 3624 Hurontario St. which serves as its office, and the evacuation of the city, the firm has already enlisted twice as many clients as it expected.

Davidson says the company will try to establish a reputation of integrity in the planning world and for that reason won't work for some developers it doesn't consider to have good past performances.



Reg Davidson, left, and Dick Belford, right, accept a congratulatory letter from regional chairman Frank Bean at the official

opening of their new planning consulting firm last week. Mayor Hazel McCallion was also on hand.