

Space exploration: Retailers finding the right fits in Kato

Progress 2011 Part II of III

For more Progress 2011 stories about strides made in the areas of retail and manufacturing, see section C.

By Dan Nienaber
dnienaber@mankatofreepress.com

MANKATO — A tough economy, an ill-suited expansion into women's clothing, and retail rental rates that held steady as sales declined almost meant the end for a 25-year old Mankato clothing business.

Instead, J. Longs is now leaner with a new location and a new man in charge of sales. The store's founder, Jim Long, is

Please see RETAIL, Page A7



Matt Long (right) and his friend Aaron Jones have partnered to take over the J. Longs menswear store, which is in a new retail location. The business was founded by Jim Long, Matt's father, who now works for Vetter Stone.

John Cross

RETAIL: Big space harder to fill

Continued from Page A1

working in sales for Vetter Stone Company while his son, Matt, is in charge of selling suits and other menswear.

After 25 years in malls — 19 of those in Mankato's River Hills Mall — J. Longs is now in the nearby strip mall that was once anchored by Barnes & Noble. Jim Long said the situation now, except for the large base of regular customers, is similar to where the business was when he was starting out in the 1980s.

"In the '80s we had nothing coming in and zero expectations," he said. "Whatever we did was positive. At that stage in your life, you don't need much. When you have three kids and a big house, all of a sudden there's pressure to get bigger and make more money just to survive.

"We're at a perfect size right now, perfect for what we do. We have 3,000 square feet, manageable rent and Matt is working hard."

Since moving into the new location in August, business hasn't been bad, Matt Long said. There are signs the economy is improving, but this past Christmas wasn't as good as it could have been for other reasons.

"December was rough just because of the storms," he said. "I really can't blame it on the economy. The

"It's not easy to find vacancies in the hilltop area simply because people don't leave."

ROSIE BRUNMEIER

economy was good."

With the snow receding and spring in sight, Rosie Brunmeier said she was seeing a growing interest in Mankato's retail space. Brunmeier is a sales and leasing agent for Coldwell Banker Commercial-Fisher Group and manager of Madison East Center.

After a slowdown in activity during the recession, Brunmeier said she saw a bump in retail leases being negotiated at the end of 2010 and in the beginning of 2011.

JoAnn Fabrics recently moved into a 20,000 square-foot space in the Madison East Center. Five Guys Burgers and Fries has opened in a section of the former Hollywood Video location. Negotiations were almost complete in early March with a second national food chain that wants the remaining portion of the building, which is near the

hilltop Hy-Vee, Brunmeier said.

Two new CVS stores, a Walgreens competitor, have been built over the winter and are now open. And commercial real estate agents are fielding more calls from national chains, many of them restaurants, that are looking for space.

She said Mankato's colleges and rapidly expanding regional medical treatment options are major reasons for the growing interest. Those factors, along with the retail sector's draw from communities to the south and west, bring thousands of potential customers to Mankato daily.

"Looking back, I don't think we did anything in that quantity last year," Brunmeier said. "It's not easy to find vacancies in the hilltop area simply because people don't leave."

Employees at Greater Mankato Growth, the city's chamber of commerce, are also optimistic about the coming year, said Jonathan Zierdt, Greater Mankato Growth president and chief executive officer.

"As a regional center, we have a nice mix of national brands as well as those unique, individually owned

specialty stores," he said.

"Folks come here for that. While our economy felt the impact of the recession, it wasn't as huge as in other communities. We don't have huge upswings, either, but that's good.

"We're hearing about a number of retail investments coming in. I don't think we're in a hold and I don't think we're going in the other direction, but it's modest growth."

The size of a space can be a factor, however, Brunmeier said. Larger spaces aren't as easy to fill.

The anchor space in the former Barnes & Noble strip mall has been empty since that store moved into the River Hills Mall several years ago. Matt Long said he occasionally hears rumors about new businesses moving in, but there haven't been any signs of real activity.

"Until I see the Dumpsters in the back, I won't be sure," he said. "I could see them filling up around the mall, but not overnight. That's a few years away. The people I've been talking to are saying we could still be five or 10 years away from a real recovery."

