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Al Kleban: A force for business growth in Fairfield  
By Kendra Bollinger, Contributing Writer  
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When questioning the effects the 2009 recession has had on Fairfield's businesses who better to ask than Al Kleban, a major taxpayer and commercial property owner in Fairfield.

Kleban told the Minuteman last week that he has lived in the area for seventy-nine years, "I'm very committed to the town and we have many retail establishments who we brought into Fairfield (The Gap, Old Navy, Citibank and many more). We are major taxpayers in the Town of Fairfield," he said.

Kleban property holdings are extensive and he thinks, they "are generally ahead of the recession." I can't speak to the chains, he said, but those who we have been able to help...I do believe are doing better than expected." All of Kleban's properties in Fairfield Center are occupied, I guess we are fully occupied for a reason, he said. "First, we are good landlords, and we like to make sure we're the best landlords, we work with our tenants and we have choice locations in Fairfield Center."

On Black Rock Turnpike, Kleban has some major remodeling plans (which include an indoor baseball facility beneath the Gap/Old Navy called 'The Club House'). "Our goal there is to remodel as much as possible."

Our occupied stores on Black Rock Turnpike also says something "positive about Fairfield's business climate," he said. Kleban has mentioned this fact to the Town Planning and Zoning Commission and Board of Appeals on numerous occasions.

"We are in the worst economic crisis that we have been in since the Great Depression," Kleban said. "I lived through a portion of the Depression and I can tell you, there are many aspects of this recession, which are quite reminiscent of that time. When you start seeing vacant stores and signs reading 'vacancy' that spreads like a virus through the town and affects commercial and residential real estate big time."

According to Kleban, it's incumbent on the TPZ and the Board of Appeals to be flexible, and "do everything they possibly can to ensure expansion and remodeling. Up to now, that has been the case, I hope that it will continue to be the case for the future." You need to be innovative and creative, to make sure that Fairfield remains the number one town in the state of Connecticut, he said.

Al Kleban and his son, Ken Kleban, have been personally masterful in creating many of the successful retail venues in town. The Klebans seek a particular type of merchandising they feel would benefit each particular space, find it and fill it. "Where we are looking to have a particular type of merchandising - we have created in our own thoughts what should go in there - and we then look for someone to do it," said Kleban. For example, "With respect to Moltos [Wine and Mozzarella Bar], I read about the concept of a mozzarella bar; there was one in Milan, London and Rome owned by a company called Obika. I went there and met with them, but it fell through, so we decided to do it on our own. We had the concept and knew exactly what we wanted to do." In creating the Brick Walk Promenade (which according to Kleban, "has many a great store")

Kleban explained about its sophisticated construction. "It was a project with a lot of moving parts." Kleban had to change the zone from residential to commercial, swap properties with Lesko Funeral home and others. They excavated for an underground garage which holds 65 cars, has two buildings totaling 40,000 square feet atop the garage, all in an effort to create a true lifestyle center such as is found in other parts of the country.

The Brick Walk has heated and lit sidewalks with solar and wind energy in some of the buildings. Kleban is also looking at mechanized parking. "We try to push the envelope everywhere we can to make it more of a place where people can park their car for the day, get off the Post Road, go visit their doctor, their lawyer, have lunch, do their banking and shopping. We want to create multiple locations where people can spend a good part of their day. We want to leave everyone with a good feel. So far, so good," Kleban said.

So what are the future plans of Al Kleban? "Our business goal is to make Fairfield an all-encompassing place to shop in. We already have everything that a town could want, a fine education system; honest government and a retail environment that's second to none and is going to improve substantially...and there have been millions of dollars invested. So that's where we're at. We're going to make sure we do whatever we have to do, to keep it going the right way. Fairfield, in my opinion, is a very lucky town," he said.

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