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Capitol Investment

Children Clothing Store Makes Move To Square

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By Lynn Welch The Capital Times

Years ago, Peg Scholtes purchased a large picture of Kresge's BabyShop at a Wisconsin Historical Society sale.

The black-and-white image, circa 1938, gives a historic glimpse of how retail was once an integral part of the Capitol Square, when Kresge's department store occupied what is now Block 89. Now, more than 60 years later, downtown workers, convention goers and those on the Square for numerous events can again shop for kids goods right on the Capitol Square.

Two years after she purchased Capitol Kids, Scholtes and her daughter, Jenna Hansen, last month moved the shop from its off-square location on Webster Street to a storefront on Carroll Street next to Home Savings. The relocation not only triples store space, but it brings new life to soft-line retail on the Capitol Square.

"We needed more space, but we also always wanted to be on the Square," Scholtes said of moving the children's clothing, toy and book store to 8 S. Carroll St. "From the day we bought the store, we had looked for new space. It happened about two years before we wanted. But from the first day, I never regretted it."

While bars, coffee shops and restaurants have been attracted to the Square and its spokes in recent years, soft-line retailers like Capitol Kids have not been quick to locate there. But with the response she has gotten so far, Scholtes believes there will be a renaissance for retail on the Square.

"We've gotten a lot of great feedback from people who

grew up in Madison and remember shopping on the Square," Scholtes said. "People really want to see the Capitol downtown area thriving."

Capitol Kids' storefront, owned and redeveloped as a retail space by HomeSavings, was most recently used by non-profit groups. It had in the past housed art retailers and print shops. But the Carroll Street side of the square, located between the Monona Terrace Convention Center and State Street shopping district and near two hotels, lends itself to daytime retail, said Home Savings President Jim Bradley.

"We're a retail operation ourselves, so we wanted to have someone there that would give the space some activity and some vibrancy, something that would generate some foot traffic," Bradley said. "A measure of their success is the number of bright yellow bags you see people carrying around the Square."

Scholtes and Hansen said the shop has seen an immediate jump in sales that has made the big move worthwhile. And having three times the space enabled them to create a friendly environment for exploring children, nursing mothers and diaper-changing parents.

They also had the opportunity to choose colors for the interior, made up of exposed brick, white display walls, the building's original wood floor and bright green, orange and matte purple accents.

Clothing sizes have been expanded to size 10 for girls and 7 for boys. The shop is also venturing into dressier children's apparel. In addition, Hansen said there are more toys for the gift-giving season, from more Brio to additional play tables, science-related learning sets and a wider selection of baby toys.

The new shop also will give Scholtes and Hansen an opportunity to host activities for kids and adults starting next year, and help non-profit organizations with fundraising activities.

"That's exactly what is needed in our downtown with all the activity going on and people coming down to the restaurants and all the people moving downtown," said Downtown Madison Inc. President Susan Schmitz. "In order for it to be really healthy, we need to bring people from all around

Dane County to shop. If we get these locally-owned, boutique shops, there's a reason to come down."

One issue Schmitz believes needs to be addressed to attract more retailers is parking. Not only scarce parking -- not always true Schmitz maintains -- but the perception that parking is scarce.

"We need to bring back parallel parking and move the busses to the outerring," said John Kampschoer, manager at The Camera Company on Carroll Street.

According to John Hendrickson, manager and vice president of E.W. Parker Jewelers, the more locally-owned retail on the Capitol Square, the better business will be for everyone. With more than 100 years on the Square, E.W. Parker is the oldest remaining mom-and-pop retailer downtown.

"One thing that really hurt is when they took away the parking on the outside," he said.

Kampschoer said he's happy to see Capitol Kids open on the Square. And he hopes more will follow. But it could take a while.

"As soon as the condos get built and everyone starts moving into them, more business will come," he said.

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