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Safety officials recommend that you change your household alarm batteries twice a year; the start and end of Daylight Saving Time are occasions to do so. Safety officials also recommend that you test alarms monthly and replace them every ten years.

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PANEL

Advocates spur downtown vitality

By Ethan Forman
» Staff Writer

The Greater Cape Ann Chamber of Commerce's Economic Outlook Breakfast on Thursday morning focused on downtown economic vitality and the need for someone to oversee downtowns and town centers as a mall manager would.

The panel discussion in the Magnolia Library and Community Center on Lexington Avenue was led by state Rep. Kristin Kassner, D-Hamilton, a planning professional by profession whose 2nd Essex district covers Georgetown, Hamilton, Ipswich, Newbury and Rowley and Precinct 1 of Topsfield.

The panel experts were Angela Brown, chief of economic development for the Metropolitan Area Planning Council; Emmy Hahn, the Massachusetts Downtown Initiative program coordinator for the state Executive Office of Economic Development; and Clark Ziegler, executive director of the Massachusetts Housing Partnership who is active in his town of Ipswich.

Even when all the pieces are in place for a downtown, it can see a spate of vacant storefronts, Hahn said, highlighting the importance of a district manager. She said there needs to be an entity that can advocate for and work with building owners, to make sure they know about things like vacant storefront or signage and façade improvement programs, to make sure that commercial uses are encouraged.

Adam Farber, the second

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generation owner of Mark Adrian Shoes on Main Street, asked about the creation of a Business Improvement District for downtown Gloucester.

Property owners vote to create these districts and are levied a fee for services such as marketing and public relations, capital improvements, public safety enhancements or special events, according to a description of the program on the state's website.

"I've been an advocate for a Business Improvement District for several years," Farber said. "The city was on track to develop it about year and a half ago, and due to some staffing changes that sort of fell apart.

"One of the biggest challenges I've seen over our decades," he said, "it's not the lack of good intentions, it's the abundance of too many people trying to do the same thing from too many organizations and too many of those organizations are volunteer run where small business owners are up to our ears with stuff to do in our own businesses.

"We don't have the time to devote to running the downtown. So paid staff, full-time staff dedicated to this district management in a sustainable way to me is an existential necessity."

Hahn said one should think of a downtown and town center as a mall, with someone to manage it to keep it clean and safe while putting on events that draw people in.

"I think the basic premise to a consistently sustainable, thriving, economically viable downtown and town center is a district manager," said Hahn, a huge proponent of Business Improvement Districts. The program lets building owners pay into a district for the staffing to advocate for the district.

Hahn spoke about a number of programs, including the Massachusetts Downtown Initiative, which offers $30,000 of consultant services to address a specific problem or issue in a downtown.

"I can't tell you that $30,000 worth of consultant services is going to solve all your problems, but it gives you a lot of information and it is very community-based and it really gets people talking," Hahn said.

In an interview after the breakfast he had attended earlier, Mayor Greg Verga said the departures last year of Economic Development Director Sal Di Stefano and Community Development Director David Fields took the wind out of the sails of the creation of a Business Improvement District.

"The bottom line is I do want to revive it," Verga said, "because that could really make a huge difference down there."

Ziegler's answer to a question about the elements that create a successful downtown was "housing and people."

There was a time when downtown Ipswich looked different with a Hills Department Store, Woolworth's, the Strand Theater, but shopping and commuter habits have changed.

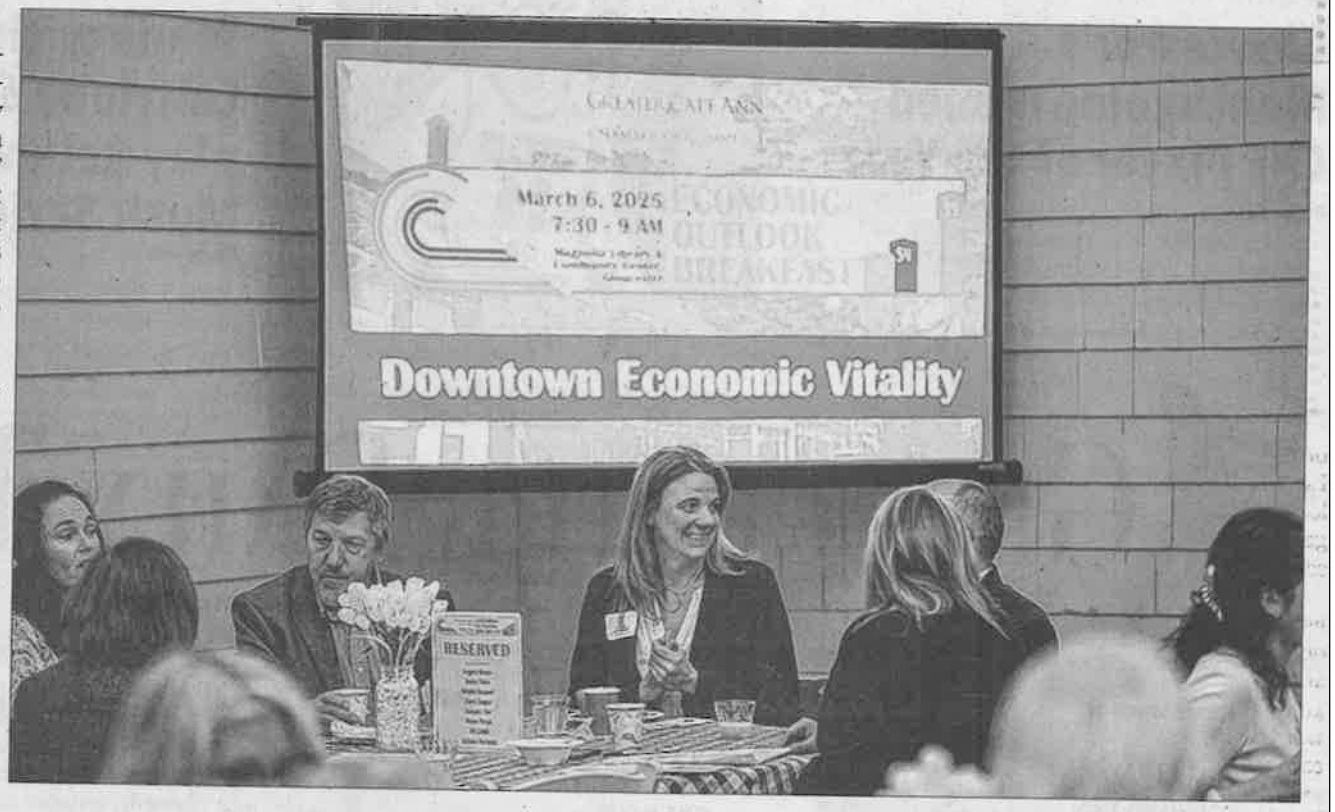
"I think we are at a moment now with the housing crisis that everybody's aware of," Ziegler said, "and downtowns that really need more love and attention and more people. There's an intersection there that I think if we can get it right, we can have really vibrant, stronger communities at the end of the day and more housing and cheaper housing."

"We are never going to create that vitality again without more people at more hours living in the downtown, living and shopping and eating and doing everything else in the downtown," he said.

Kassner described downtowns "as the heart of our communities."

"But they require in our older downtowns that were developed hundreds of years ago, require really an understanding of what we have and an understanding of where we want to go and really curating those downtowns."

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DAVID SOKOL/Staff photo

Gloucester Chief Administrative Officer Jill Cahill talks with community members Thursday before the start of the Greater Cape Ann Chamber of Commerce's 2025 Economic Outlook Breakfast at the Magnolia Library & Community Center.



Greater Cape Ann Chamber of Commerce Director of Operations Sam Bevins welcomes guests to the 2025 Economic Outlook Breakfast.