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## **A changed landscape, worry and hope on State Street in wake of protests, amid COVID-19 pandemic**

Barry Adams | Wisconsin State Journal

Jun 21, 2020

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**N**atural light, customers and hope have begun to return on State Street.

But uneasiness remains even as the plywood starts to come off the windows.

Some businesses are permanently closing after the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed both retail and dining. Then looting and vandalism followed protests spurred by the death of George Floyd during an encounter with Minneapolis police that has brought the “Black Lives Matter” movement to the top of the nation’s consciousness.



Businesses along State Street in Madison continue to face difficulties with COVID-19 and some of the protests that turned violent. Some business have limited occupancy and some are open by appointment only.

STEVE APPS, STATE JOURNAL

The business owners who remain on one of Madison’s most iconic streets — stretching from the State Capitol to UW-Madison — are trying to move forward with respect and purpose.

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“Right now everything is based on hope,” said Curtis Diller, who removed the plywood from his **ice cream and candy shop Kilwins, 208 State St.**, on June 11. “We’re hoping things will turn. We have to address the issues to find the new normal. And hopefully the new normal is prosperity for everybody.”

## More support

State Street has been altered and normal is unlikely to return anytime soon, business owners say. The shape of the new norm could mean expanded and more diverse product offerings and more minority-owned businesses.

Some retailers, restaurateurs and landlords are banding together asking for more support from police.

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At **Nick's Restaurant & Lounge**, which has been at 226 State St. since 1959, owner Dino Christ, 53, said he's unsure what State Street will ultimately look like. He has owned Nick's since 1996.

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Dino Christ has owned Nick's Restaurant & Lounge since 1996. He remains concerned about his safety and, for now, will leave his windows covered in plywood, even though it has darkened the mood inside his business, a staple on State Street since 1959.

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“I’m hoping for the better but in order to do that they’re going to have to start bringing more businesses back on State Street and start subsidizing and making it a little more diverse,” Christ said during a break from his kitchen last week. “The city and the state are going to have to help because right now State Street is behind in the game compared to the rest of the city and the state.”

The city is studying a Downtown recovery plan introduced last week that could create a fund to distribute grants of up to \$25,000 for retailers and property owners to make repairs and improvements.



The boards that were removed from Dubai Mediterranean Restaurant & Bar sit alongside the State Street business last week. City officials are hoping to preserve plywood covered in art for future showings at Madison museums and Monona Terrace.

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Meanwhile, the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County is providing up to \$7,500 each to qualified businesses after a major fundraising effort resulted in \$150,000.

“Both business and property owners are looking to feel confident in opening up their businesses, to feel like they’re safe and that customers will come visit them,” said Tiffany Kenney, executive director of the Central Business Improvement District, which includes State Street. “There’s so much unease about that.”



Sean Scannell, co-owner of the Soap Opera on State Street, has not allowed customers into the store for weeks, instead taking orders online and from a kiosk at the front door. The business on Friday allowed customers into the store, but plywood remains over its windows.

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As an example, Kenney said that on June 12 she had a list of 12 businesses that wanted help removing their boards. By the following Monday, when Kenney arrived with a crew of volunteers, five business owners had second thoughts over safety concerns and decided to leave the plywood in place.

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At Nick's, Christ said his business is down 70 percent when compared with this time last year. He had thought about taking the boards off his windows last week but may not take them down until later this week.

"I'm still too scared," Christ said. "There's still things going on. All of the protests have been great but there's still a small element that could cause problems."

'I'm feeling violated and angry': Downtown Madison businesses bearing brunt of community outrage



## Closing up

Some businesses are leaving State Street entirely. **Driftless Studio**, a nature gallery and gift shop at 214 State St. for the past 15 years, is closing due to a retirement by the owner planned before the pandemic.



However, **Camera Company**, a fixture on Capitol Square since 1977 and where the company was founded, surprised Downtown leaders after it emptied its store and announced that it will not reopen. Its two other stores in the city remain open.



The former Pizza Di Roma location is being advertised for rent. The restaurant remains open at its West Side location but its State Street store has been shuttered after being damaged and looted during protests in late May and early June. More than 40 of the 152 businesses on State Street may not reopen, according to a recent survey.

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Pizza Di Roma, which has been on State Street for the past 18 years, is also shuttered and the space is for lease. It has transferred its operations to its West Side location on Grand Canyon Boulevard after the State Street store had its windows smashed and its phone and point of sales systems destroyed by looters, according to owner Marinela Manastirli.

In all, more than 40 business have indicated in a BID survey that they may not return, creating yet another challenge to fill empty spaces. It's unclear whether the vacancies and reduced sales for those that remain will result in a decrease in lease rates.

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## Message heard

For some of the business owners on State Street, the turbulent past few weeks have left more than broken windows and plywood.

Robert Bowhan, owner of **August, a designer shoe and clothing store** he opened in late 2017 at 414 State St., said the protests, looting and damage helped send a message. His store, which is inspired in part by Black culture, had its windows smashed and was looted.



Robert Bowhan, owner of the shoe and clothing store August, said the recent Black Lives Matter protests and even the unwelcome damage to his store have sent a powerful message.

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The 1,000-square-foot shop's inventory includes \$500 pairs of tennis shoes and \$300 track suits. The shop is also home to social events, an active Instagram account and was designed as more of a hangout that also sells shoes and clothing.

The damage to his store was not welcome but was understandable, Bowhan said.

“Those of us that are going to be fortunate enough to live through this and survive through this from a business perspective, especially us white business owners, need to take time to reflect on those feelings that we had during the course of this scenario,” Bowhan said. “The helplessness. Watching your store get looted while the police stood by, so not feeling you have adequate protection from the police. Not knowing if your economic future is safe or not and that fear that our Black friends and family and community members literally live with all of the time, every day.”

One of the largest public art projects in Madison history followed the riots, as artists painted messages of hope and change on the plywood that covered damaged storefronts.

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As the plywood comes down, officials are trying to preserve the artwork. The pieces are being considered for public displays at Monona Terrace, Wisconsin Historical Society Museum, Chazen Museum of Art and Madison Museum of Contemporary Art.

## Moving forward

At **Anthology, 230 State St.**, the conversation and business plan is not void of the Black Lives Matter movement for Laura Komai, and her sister, Sachi Komai, who opened the shop in 2008. They recently collaborated with 20 Black artists to create a series of Black Lives Matters sticker packs scheduled to be released in the coming weeks.

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Sachi Komai, co-owner of Anthology, a paper, craft and gift store on State Street, helps out a family of customers that visited the shop last week. Anthology has reached out to Black artists to sell their works at the store and last week removed the plywood over its windows.

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The store also sells BLM posters and has increased its roster of minority artists. The shop is also trying to survive with little financial cushion, limits on how many people can be in the store at once and weeks of reduced sales.

“That’s a concern not just for State Street,” Laura Komai said. “In my mind that’s a concern for every single small business everywhere right now.”

Amy Moore has owned **Little Luxuries** since 2011. The gift shop, popular with locals and tourists alike, has been on State Street since 1990. The store's plywood artwork came down on Wednesday, and Moore said she wants to expand her inventory by paying more attention to Black-owned businesses and artists and to which organizations she donates.

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“I think there's a lot of healing that needs to be done and we have a lot of work to do,” Moore said in reference to addressing the needs of the Black community. “It's just important for messages to be heard here. We've seen a lot of people come out and absorb it and appreciate it and take it all in. Despite the boards coming down, the messages will be remembered.”

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Barry Adams covers regional and business news for the Wisconsin State Journal.

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