Somali stores bring people back to Lisbon Street

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LEWISTON — Paul Poliquin of Paul's Clothing and Shoe Store remembers when the downtown was a shopping destination. The sidewalks were so busy “you literally bumped into someone you knew.”

Then came the empty storefronts as shoppers moved to the malls.

Now Poliquin, who's been in Lisbon Street retail for 38 years, is surrounded by occupied stores with African names. “We're talking 25 to 30 Somali stores," he said. "I've counted them.”

They're not Poliquin's first economic development pick, but he credits the businesses with bringing people back to lower Lisbon Street.

“Go back a few years before they came. It was a desolate downtown,” Poliquin said. “There were a lot of empty storefronts. What would you rather see, all vacant storefronts or some people walking around?”

Somali foot traffic, though, hasn't boosted his own sales. He's still hoping for more large companies to find the downtown.

Somali shoppers "don't come in here,” Poliquin said. “I carry industrial work clothing and industrial work boots. That's really not their cup of tea.” They don't cause problems, he said. “They stay to themselves. Pretty much the Somali community patronize their own retail establishments."

Eight years ago the city was on a roll, he said. “The bank came in. The university, Oxford Networks came in. Now people come off the turnpike and say, 'Wow, it's beautiful.'” That beauty as he sees it “stops at my corner. I would like to see more of the continued growth, more jobs coming to downtown.” But the recession hit. “And you have what you have.”

The owner of Twin's Variety, which sports an American flag outside, declined to comment about the Somalis' impact on Lisbon Street.

Doucette Insurance co-owner Lina Doucette-Chasse said the Somalis are good for her business. They buy insurance from her.

“The Somali people are really nice people,” she said. “We've had good

relationships with all of them. The biggest problem is communication, but we get along really well."

Kimberly Doucette was at her desk Wednesday at Doucette Insurance when a Somali woman dressed in a long skirt and head covering walked in, sat down, and began to talk over paperwork. The woman, Anisa Dol of the Al Fatha store across the street, is one of their insurance customers.

Doucette Insurance came to Lisbon Street in 2004. "A lot of buildings were empty," Doucette-Chasse said. More Somali stores "have improved our business."

These days she knows more about the Somali culture. She knows it is now Ramadan, a holy time for Muslims when many fast from sunrise to sunset. "A lot of them had hard lives before they came here. They're very appreciative," Doucette-Chasse said. They're family-oriented and generous. "They take care of each other."

The language barrier and the large Somali families remind her of Franco-American families like hers years ago. She was one of seven; her family spoke French at home. Her grandmother did not speak English.

A few buildings away, handyman Tom Dahlberg was installing a new commercial tile floor for a Somali restaurant, the Three One Cafe.

The restaurant features chicken, goat meat, rice and vegetables dishes. "I eat here every day. The food is that good," Dahlberg said.

Two years ago Dahlberg put an ad in the paper offering his work. Cafe owner Mohamed Mahamud saw the ad and called. "He likes my work," Dahlberg said. "He knows I'm fair. He passed word around."

He said he's called "Uncle Tom" by the Somalis, a term of honor given to someone they trust. Somalis have hired him to renovate several businesses, including work at the mosque, and building a meat-cutting room in a grocery store. "They keep me busy."

Dahlberg said he never used to come to Lisbon Street. With so many stores closed, he had no reason to. "Business is coming back," he said. "It's all Somalian here. People are coming here."

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