



Faith, an English bulldog owned by Gary Ritch, lies on a window ledge inside a second-story loft on Salina Street.
(Michael Greanter / mgreanter@syracuse.com)

DOWNTOWN GOES TO THE DOGS, and it's a good thing

By Sean Kirst
skirst@syracuse.com

Ralph Rotella and Al Bradwell have more than 60 years of combined work experience in downtown Syracuse. They often get together for morning espresso in Rotella's Discount Shoe Repair Shop, a commercial institution on East Washington Street.

For all their time downtown, they're witnessing a first:

"Everywhere you turn now," Bradwell said, "you're going to see a dog."

Even to city regulars, it's a phenomenon. "I've been down here for 22 years," said Dennis Connors, curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association, "and I've never seen so many people with dogs."

Connors said you'd probably need to go back to the 19th century to find a time when dogs were so plentiful downtown.

The reason for the upswing

is simple. As more downtown buildings are converted into residential space, many new tenants arrive with a simple wish:

"A lot of people want dogs, and we want those people in our buildings," said Bob Doucette, a developer who welcomes dogs in residential units.

The animals come in all breeds and sizes. Tim Lentini, a medical student from New York City, strolled Bank Alley last week with Freyda, a 3-month-old yellow Labrador puppy.

For a young guy alone in a new city, Freyda's presence is a reward at the end of a long day:

"She always loves you," Lentini said.

In most ways, downtown merchants see dog owners as more evidence of a recovering district. The only real drawback is summarized by Rotella, the longtime cobbler:

If you're not careful, he said, you can end up scraping a particular substance off your shoe.

Ed Koolakian, whose Koolakian's men's clothing shop opened downtown in 1905, said the disappearance of the winter snow in Hanover Square provided stark reminders of dog owners who aren't conscientious. While Koolakian said the sloppiness demands some conversation, he also shares in the consensus:

"It's a good problem," he said of so many neighbors and their dogs, "in the sense that 25 or 30 years ago, it's something we wouldn't see."

Merike Treier, executive director of the Downtown Committee, described the dogs of downtown as "exciting proof downtown is becoming a real neighborhood." While no one has an exact handle on the canine population, Treier estimated 200 downtown units allow dogs, within a growing district that now has thousands of residents.

"To me, it's just part of the fabric of a city," said Joe Hucko, developer of the 66-unit Merchants

Commons, a place where tenants are welcome to own dogs.

A few downtown canines are so familiar they've built their own quiet celebrity. Chief among them is Faith, a solemn English bulldog owned by Gary Ritch, operator of the Central Variety shop on South Salina Street. Faith, not quite 5, is so well-known that passers-by often ask Ritch how she's doing after recent surgery.

Ritch remembers when Faith was one of the only downtown dogs, a situation that's changed in a big way. While it might seem that a downtown apartment would be a tough place to raise a dog, Ritch said it has one significant advantage: If you work near where you live, you have the luxury of checking on a dog throughout the day.

The animals, he said, also build community: He's grown to know many dog owners he regularly encounters at M. Lemp Park, a green space at Warren and Fayette streets.

"Here's the thing," Ritch said. "Most of these dogs? They're fabulous, really friendly."

Lemp Park is named for M. Lemp Jewelers, a landmark business across the street. Baye Muhammad, city parks commissioner, said the city responded to some concerns about all the downtown dogs by installing dispensers with plastic bags for animal waste at Lemp Park and near the MOST, the children's museum of science and technology at Armory Square.

Jill Ozinsky, of Lemp's Jewelers, said she called to suggest the bags after noticing too many land mines, so to speak, in the grass at Lemp Park. Ozinsky enjoys the dogs of downtown. She often admires a dog that watches the world from a Fayette Street apartment window. She sees the canine presence as adding warmth and gentle charm to the city.

But if we're going to celebrate dogs in the city center, she said, we ought to be conscious of the best ways of cleaning after them.

As for fully embracing dog owners, Kristine Garcia said we've got a ways to go.



See more photos of downtown dogs. B-2

Garcia moved to Syracuse a few months ago, after accepting a position in cancer research. It took her a while to find a downtown landlord who'd allow her to keep Hero, a good-natured Akita.

Dog and owner came from Manhattan, a place Garcia said is more welcoming to pets than Syracuse. Many New York City shops allowed customers to bring dogs onto the premises, Garcia said. The city is renowned for its many "pet friendly" stores, hotels and buildings.

She mentioned a dream shared by almost every dog owner we interviewed: It would be wonderful, Garcia said, to have a fenced, downtown park where dogs could burn off energy.

"The minute our dogs hit grass, they want to run," said Jake Sgroi, who joined Kailyn Winoski on a downtown walk with their Miniature Pinschers, Roscoe and Lucy.

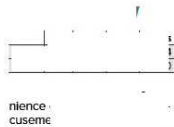
While civic officials don't say it publicly, you can guess their concerns about a dog park: Once you make it official, it immediately needs rules and some level of supervision, which creates the potential for liability headaches.

Yet some kind of dog park seems inevitable, either from the city, a civic agency or a downtown entrepreneur. The need is felt each day by Tom Maybury, a consultant who left Baltimore to settle here with Sammy, a high-energy Husky.

Downtown Syracuse, Maybury said, lacks two critical fixtures that define a true city neighborhood:

"I wish we had a grocery store," he said, "and I wish we had a place where I could let her run."

Sean Kirst is a columnist with The Post-Standard. Email him at skirst@syracuse.com or write to him in care of The Post-Standard, 220 S. Warren St., Syracuse 13202.



1	2	3
1	2	3
1	2	3

