Vacant shops reflect struggling retail sector

By KONNOR FURBER

THE impacts of high real estate prices, operational costs, and crime on the retail sector in Mareeba are starting to bite, with 13 vacant shops now lining the main street.

The large number of empty retail spaces grew this month with the closure of national clothing brands, Rockmans and Rivers, which was largely fuelled by the rapid increase in online consumerism.

Current vacant spaces in Byrnes Street include the former ANZ Bank, Fantasy Tails pet shop (next to Domino's), Bosca's Burger Bar (in the old RSL building), Yamaha (who were victims of arson), Ringers Western, 1st Concept Salon, Malo Lelei (in between Priceline and the Reject Shop), the old TAB (next to Graham Hotel), and three shops in between Claude Caters Mensland and the Queen Bee laundromat.

The trend has concerned the town's Chamber of Commerce which attributes the closures to the difficulties and challenges faced by the retail sector, mostly from online shopping and the rising costs of doing business.

Chamber president Joe Moro said the growing number of empty shops was "very concerning".

"It's always disheartening to see a business close down, and we would also like to see the CBD be more vibrant than it currently is," he said.

"The reality is, it's a very tough business environment right now. A lot of costs like power, labour, and many other components have gone up for businesses.

"And for some, they haven't been able to pass that cost on and that's impacting the viability of the entire small business sector."

Former business manager of Ringers Western, Tito Srhoj, echoed Mr Moro's sentiments, stating the store was simply "not economically viable".

"It just wasn't making the kind of money we had hoped. Our semi-trucks can make in one weekend what our shop would have in a month," he said.

"So, in the end, we decided to relocate the shop to Cairns."

Another factor concerning the chamber was how crime has been affecting local business owners.

"I know of a couple of businesses who have had to close up shop because of the level of crime they've had to endure," Mr Moro said.

"It's not every business, but a number of them in the CBD have had some sort of problem with vandalism or even shoplifting.

"The chamber and many members of the community are very concerned. We really need to turn that trend around and make Mareeba a much safer and more friendly place to shop," he said.

Leasing a vacant retail space can also be very expensive, with rents on the rise and unaffordable for many small business operators.

Many of the vacant buildings are privately owned and have a real estate agency tasked to lease the property.

Mr Moro said people choosing to shop elsewhere could also have a long-lasting ripple effect.

"The problem with having shops closed is that we don't have the variety," he said.

"If we lose particular lines that people buy in the town, they will either have to go out of town or use the internet to get what they need.

"If you go somewhere else to shop for one item, you may buy a number of other items, and that has a knock-on effect for the local businesses.

"From the chamber's point of view, we'll continue to promote Mareeba as a vibrant area but it's really important at the same time that people also support the local shops.

"It's important that we buy whatever we can from within the area as much as possible."

In contrast to the number of businesses closing, a new business has just opened its doors in Byrnes Street. The Big Hat Queensland, which specialises in a large range of hats, also stocks souvenirs, home decor items and has a gallery where they work with local artists.



Some of the retail spaces that remain vacant in Mareeba's main street.



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