

Recommendation from Andy: Mixed signals for downtown Evanston as retailers enter new year

SNO Sites Service Manager <notifications@snoservicemanager.com>

Thu 1/11/2024 9:58 PM

To: Andy Vick <avick@downtownevanston.org>

The Daily Northwestern

This story was published on [The Daily Northwestern](#).

Mixed signals for downtown Evanston as retailers enter new year

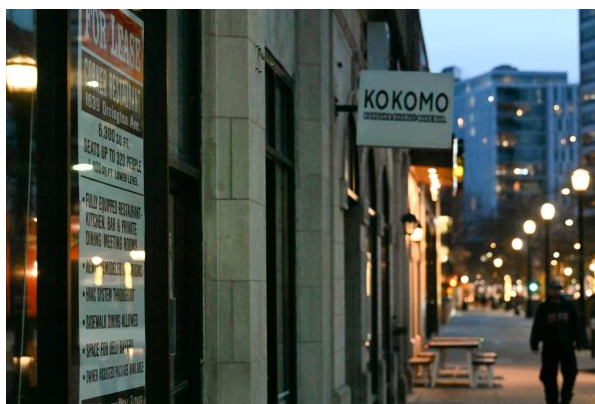
[Shun Graves](#), Assistant City Editor

Matthew Abitbol opened a specialty footwear store in downtown Evanston just before the COVID-19 pandemic closed the world down.

“We would chase down a single sale,” said Abitbol, the owner of Commonwealth Running Company. “A single shoe sale meant everything. People take for granted when a business is doing well.”

Since the store opened in early 2020, everything has changed, Abitbol said. Last year marked a “turning point” for his business — and as the new year begins, downtown has continued to recover from its lows during the pandemic.

The downtown retail vacancy rate currently stands at 9.72%, one percentage point below where it stood at the beginning of last year, according to data from Evanston’s economic development office, which did not respond to requests for further comment.



Retail vacancies have dropped, but downtown Evanston still faces headwinds as it enters 2024. (Shun Graves/The Daily Northwestern)

The district's office vacancy rate of 11.6% — though a notch lower than it was [in October](#) — still marks an increase from the same time last year. City officials gave a troubling prognosis last fall, saying a model showed office vacancies skyrocketing in 2024.

This week's numbers provide mixed signals for downtown. Vacant office space could pose challenges for downtown's recovery, but Abitbol said foot traffic and sales have picked up at his store.

"By March or April last year, it just felt different," he said. "When you walked outside, it was livelier and more people walking and talking and going to lunch. It just felt like what I saw when I was scouting the location in the summer of '19. I just saw a lot of people, and I didn't see that for three years."

Despite intense year-over-year inflation, consumers still seem willing to pay the higher prices, Abitbol said. U.S. consumer spending has grown over the past few months, though consumer confidence remains far lower than it did in early 2020, according to federal and Morning Consult data.

On Orrington Avenue, Bookends & Beginnings has seen a different story, owner Nina Barrett said. Months of construction have blocked off part of the bookstore's block, and multiple storefronts remain vacant. The store moved from Bookman's Alley [to new digs](#) in the heart of downtown last year, when Barrett said she expected more walk-in traffic.

That expectation has proven untrue, she said. Barrett added that her concerns about the construction and persistent vacancies on Orrington have fallen on deaf ears — a contention that Downtown Evanston Executive Director Andy Vick dismissed.

"The city is aware of her frustrations," he said. "Unfortunately, when there's construction work that has to be done, it has to be done."

Events and programs like concerts that bring people downtown will prove paramount for downtown this year, Vick said.

Barrett said without more foot traffic, doing business in a high-rent downtown could remain challenging.

"Government should fix something," she said. "But people with relentless online shopping are also complicit in what they're seeing when they walk around."

Email: shungraves2027@u.northwestern.edu

X: [@realShunGraves](#)

Related Stories:

- [City Council tables minimum wage increase, drops cashless business ban](#)
- [Evanston leaders hail new safety science company UL headquarters amid downtown office struggles](#)
- [Rising office vacancies show warning signs for downtown Evanston](#)

Need help? Reach out to the site administrator of The Daily Northwestern at web@dailynorthwestern.com.

This message was sent from an unmonitored mailbox on behalf of [The Daily Northwestern](#), a website hosted by SNO Sites.