

Summary of Survey of Spring Street Merchants

During the first part of January 2013, merchants with businesses on Spring Street in Williamstown, Massachusetts were given a survey inquiring about seasonal variation in their business; their market; and the benefits and disadvantages of their Spring Street location. The results are a useful resource for understanding the current business climate on Spring Street and for planning for the future. Ten surveys were completed and returned. Below is a brief summary of the results.

- Spring Street merchants are very stable. Seven out of ten of the merchants have been on Spring Street more than ten years.
- Summer is the busiest season for 7 out of 10 of the merchants.
- There is more variation in the slowest season: 5 merchants reported Winter as their slowest season; 3 reported Spring; and 1 reported Fall. One merchant reported Spring and Winter as equally slow.
- Months mentioned as the busiest were January, July, August, September, October and December. Months mentioned as the slowest were January, February, March, April and December.
- Three businesses reported being reliant (more than 35%) on customers aged 17 to 25; two businesses reported being reliant on customers aged 36 to 50; and four businesses reported being reliant on customers aged 51 to 65.
- Five businesses reported being reliant (more than 35%) on Williamstown residents; three businesses are reliant on Williams College students; three businesses are reliant on non-locals; and one business is reliant on other area residents.

Business on Spring Street is highly dependent on walk-in traffic from students, alumni, and parents of students and prospective students. As such, business is influenced by weather, college events, and holiday weekends. Days that are hot or cold bring shoppers indoors. Very cold winter weather, and “too” beautiful spring weather, however, keep customers home or outside, respectively, and result in slow business days. While it is not surprising that weather and Williams College events influence busiest days for merchants, three businesses also mentioned Williamstown Theatre Festival performances as positively affecting their busiest days.

Spring Street has the benefit of being centrally located, with close proximity to college functions. It is walkable from campus and many parts of town. It has significant foot traffic and businesses attract walk-in customers from among that foot traffic. It is a natural attraction to alumni, students’ parents, and parents of prospective students.

There are also drawbacks to a Spring Street location. Parking was mentioned as a problem by half of the merchants. Customers complain to merchants about the lack of street parking and the enforced one hour parking on Spring Street. The time limit reduces the ability of customers to browse multiple shops,

restaurants, and services. Parking for the shops is particularly problematic during Williams College sports events.

Other drawbacks mentioned concerning Spring Street as a business location include: landlord issues; limited growth opportunities; no late-night gathering place other than bars; the expansion of Williams College offices onto Spring Street; a lack of local interest; a limited population; and the dying reputation of Spring Street.

Merchants were asked what one thing they would change about Spring Street. More parking and more retail businesses were the most frequent answers given. One merchant wished for a stronger network/community among business owners who support each other and new ideas. One merchant wished for more diversity of ownership.

Finally, merchants were asked what positive change they had made in their own business practices in the past 5 years. Answers given included: accepting credit cards and PayPal online; updating their website; upgrading their technology; extending their hours; adding seating; introducing mass email for marketing and promotions; and diversifying their product line to serve different customers at different times of the year.