

Tim Bridenbecker might be the happiest guy in New York this holiday shopping season. If not, Angelo Vigliotti might have the Empire State's most giant ear-to-ear grin about now.

Bridenbecker opened his Cayuga County Riverbend Café at 4 a.m. last week to accommodate a rush of shoppers and local store employees that a year ago were, well, unimaginable. Vigliotti, proprietor of nearby Avicelli's Pizza, has had months in 2004 where revenues were double – up a full 100 percent – over the same month just a year prior. He plans to begin work on his business expansion right after Christmas.

In all, Bridenbecker is one of 14 now-open stores that were barely dreams a year ago. Five additional new retailers, a national hotel chain and two more national restaurants have plans on the drawing board as well in Auburn, N.Y. In all, officials there are currently in negotiation with at least two dozen more stores.

“Those are all new names that we've gotten commitments from,” according to Scott Boggio, a principal in the firm that manages the once moribund Fingerlakes Mall.

Welcome to the world of Bass Pro.

“Bass Pro Shop is the catalyst, no doubt,” Boggio told a Syracuse publication. “People will drive to the property to visit Bass Pro for weekend trips, and I can imagine in the summertime it will include multiple trips to the store. We owe a lot to Bass Pro, and we're trying to leverage that. We're going to continue with the momentum that we have and obtain additional commitments.”

That, of course, contrasted by the recent revelation that some 62 percent of businesses that received block grant loans in downtown Buffalo have defaulted on those gifts over the past couple of decades.

Garland, Texas, spent \$24 million in taxpayer money to land a store less than half the size of Buffalo's. Pearl, Mississippi, about \$40 million for a 130,000 square foot store. They are projecting \$100 million in additional retail development because of Bass Pro. The city is one-tenth the size of Buffalo.

Mesa, Arizona, is contributing upwards of \$40 million to get a store there. Last time I checked, Mesa is not downtown Buffalo. Our deal is suddenly looking better.

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Of course, inevitably, and proving once again how far we have been battered and broken, Western New Yorkers can find negatives no matter how good the news. Naysayers are already grumbling that taxpayers are ponying up too much money to help fund what is the most significant economic development in Buffalo in, literally, decades. Misanthropes apparently equate the investment with a new doctor's office in Amherst, or a new supermarket in Cheektowaga, or as if some fly-by-night company is slapping together a pre-fab building to peddle snake oil.

It's not like Bass Pro won't have a vested interest. They'll be pumping some \$60 million of its own money into the rebirth of Memorial Auditorium. Instead of just bulldozing a grove of trees or paving over an empty field – the Auburn store was a vacant K-mart and in Harrisburg, Pa., Bass Pro renovated a massive but long-empty Lord and Taylors department store -- the deal preserves a great local building to which many attach great memories and emotion.

And, for those who worry that an Auburn location, about 130 miles to the east is somehow a threat, it's not. Since many equate Bass Pro stores to destinations and not just stores, think of it this way: Auburn has Fantasy Island. Buffalo is getting Six Flags Darien Lake.

Bill Wilsback, so giddy at the prospect of a Bass Pro in his Finger Lakes back yard, decided to take a second job there, but not to pay the electric bill or the grocery tab each week. Whatever skeptics might have existed there have disappeared faster than a Friday night fish fry. When his wife asked what he planned to do with the additional income, he was ready with an answer. “I said, I'm not getting a paycheck. I told them just to give me vouchers for the merchandise.”

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*(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a paid weekly circulation of 75,000 homes, providing collaborative advertising and editorial support for member publications. For more information on WIN, or to provide feedback on this column, visit our website at [www.wnynewspapers.com](http://www.wnynewspapers.com). Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)*