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We feared new Route 178 would kill Utica

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Ron Kreiser lives and works on Route 178 in Utica, a stone's throw from the junction of Interstate 80. On a good day, it's three minutes from the I-80 turnoff to his doorstep.

But Utica is booming these days and Kreiser now fights bumper-to-bumper traffic getting home.

"I avoid the four corners on the weekend because it takes a half hour to get from I-80 to my shop," said Kreiser, owner of Illinois Valley Fence & Pool. "I think they have a lot of traffic and when they realigned they should have made it four lanes instead of two."

By "realigned," he means the much-disputed decision in 2004 to effectively move Route 178 out of downtown Utica. The decision didn't sit well with villagers who feared traffic would simply whiz past downtown.

They need not have worried. It's been two years since realignment was completed and the unwanted traffic has ushered in some decidedly welcome cash. Utica businesses are raking in more retail sales receipts than ever before, setting eight monthly sales-tax records in the past seven quarters and averaging \$250,000 a year since realignment was finished.

Mayor Matt Jereb said he's "absolutely" pleased and "I hope it's directly proportional to our businesses being successful."

"The realignment provided some new opportunities for the village such as what we can do on Mill Street," he said. "All in all, I think we've adjusted well and we just need to concentrate on promoting our businesses not only downtown but all up and down Route 178."

Not all village business owners believe realignment has been good for downtown. Pam Shanley opened Clark's Run Antiques on the side of Route 178 opposite downtown. She thinks she was well-served avoiding Mill Street.

"We only opened the wine-tasting store two months ago, but I can tell you on this beautiful Saturday (Aug. 27) our antique store is busy and the downtown is kind of dead," Shanley said. "Actually, I believe the downtown has suffered because of the realignment. There are a lot of quiet days downtown."

Kelly Waters, co-owner of Skoog's Pub & Grill, dismisses the notion that realignment is killing downtown.

Sure, there are slow days; but that's more a consequence of the village's increasingly crippling weekend traffic that makes some motorists turn around and head for home. But when the traffic can get through, business can be brisk.

"We have had a couple of great summers, for sure," Waters said.

Jereb acknowledged he's spoken one-on-one with business owners and come away with divergent views.

"Some of them have feel like they've been impacted by it," he allowed, "and others feel like they've benefited, such as those who can now offer outdoor dining on the sidewalks."

Recent sales tax data support the belief that realignment has been more of a blessing than a curse.

Summer 2015, for example, was the best on record. From Memorial Day weekend to the end of September, the first full summer without construction on Route 178, Utica raked in \$105,000 — a figure close to what Utica raised in all of 2006.

True, realignment was completed amid an improving economy and as Starved Rock State Park ushered in an ever-increasing flow of tourists. But the finished project also appears to have immediately jolted Utica's economy.

Realignment was completed in 2014 ahead of the all-important Burgoo Festival and village tills promptly exploded. Utica finished autumn that year with three straight monthly sales-tax records including a \$60,000 October, three times the previous high mark.

And things don't appear to have slowed. Becki Kabelis, co-owns Flutterby Junction with husband John, reported the tourists have kept on coming and padding the bottom line nicely.

"I think it's been the best year so far for us," Kabelis said, "and I hope for everybody else, too."



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Remember when people worried that realigning Route 178 would kill Utica? Well, village businesses are raking in more money than ever. Not all business owners think moving the highway off Mill Street was a great idea; but numbers from the Department of Revenue have put to rest any fears that realignment would kill downtown. Village businesses have set eight monthly sales-tax records in the past seven quarters.

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She might get her wish. Village businesses reported their best-ever March and best-ever May. Another big Burgoo and Utica will crack \$250,000 in yearly sales tax receipts for only the second time in its history.

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