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Messina's debuts new name, new look

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NORTH ANDOVER — To some it will always be Messina's.

But last night the shopping plaza that has been downtown's centerpiece since the late 1960s unveiled a new name and look to the public.

It's a change town officials hope will help make the downtown area the thriving economic force it once was.

The former Messina's Shopping Centre debuted as the **First and Main Marketplace** with a new beige facade, landscaping and lighting.

"This is a critical project," said

"We all live here. We have a close connection to the area. We wanted to help redefine downtown."

Tina Messina

Town Manager Mark Rees. "We're focused on economic development in North Andover, particularly in the downtown."

The Messina family, which now leads the NA Realty Group, has owned the plaza since 1969, when

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Santo and Anne Messina look at the new sign for the Messina family's Shopping center in downtown North Andover.

ANGIE BEAULIEU/
Staff photo

MESSINA: Family invests millions in downtown

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patriarch Santo Messina purchased it and opened a store.

The family spent nearly \$7 million renovating the 52,000-square-foot center over the last two and a half years. The center, which sits on First and Main streets, across from Town Hall, last saw an overhaul in 1985.

Tina Messina said the family decided to redesign the plaza shortly after Lembo's Marketplace closed its doors in 2006, and many shops in the area were following suit. People weren't coming downtown like they used to.

It was a time when town officials were starting to question how they would keep Main Street viable.

"We decided to make a huge commitment to downtown," said Messina, who helps run the family business with five brothers and sisters. "We all live here. We have a close connection to the area. We wanted to help redefine downtown."

The renovation is just one way downtown is getting a face-lift.

The town is in the middle of a downtown renovation, which it hopes to have done by early next year.

The project, spanning from Sutton Street to Water Street, entails installing new sidewalks, downtown welcome signs, a new traffic light at the intersection of Main and Sutton streets, planters and trees. Crews will replace brick crosswalks with a special thermoplastic surface that will resemble brick but will be easier to maintain.

And a downtown merchants group formed in April and new shops are opening up like Fabulous Findz, which sells costumes, clothing, jewelry and antiques.

"The plaza looks great," said selectmen's Chairwoman

Rosemary Smedile. "They did a beautiful job."

While most of the work is done at the new First and Main Marketplace, Messina's Liquors is still undergoing renovation. Tina Messina said she hopes to see all construction done by early 2010.

The contractor for the project was R. Rumpf and Associates Inc., and the Messinas used architectural firm H.H. Morant and Co. Inc.

There are still four empty storefronts, and Messina said there is room for about 20 tenants. Current tenants include CVS/pharmacy, Anton's Cleaners, LaseAway, Clifford Jewelers, Boston Chowda and Today's Barber Shop.

In the coming weeks, the Messinas will embark on an initiative they're calling "Local Launch," where they will give local entrepreneurs a chance to start their own niche businesses at the center — anything from a clothing boutique to specialty supermarket.

"We'll help them with everything, accountants, architects, construction," Tina Messina said. "A lot of people have great ideas but they don't know how to start up and run a business. ... We're basically looking for dreamers."

Santo Messina said he was happy his children have carried on the business he began four decades ago with his wife, Anne.

"I had a gut feeling I had to take this place over," he said, beginning a story he's told his family many times. "I knew we might lose everything. I had no more than 2 cents in my pocket. I re-mortgaged my house, borrowed. But I did it."

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