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LOCAL



ROGER DARRIGRAND/Staff photo

Tina Messina is helping local entrepreneurs dream big in North Andover as the Messinas have started the "Local Launch" program to attract people who have always wanted to open a business but didn't know how.

## First & Main looks to become a dreamer's haven

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**NORTH ANDOVER** — A laid-off investment analyst who yearns to open a bakery. A retired engineer who has had his sights set on a toy store.

Those are the people who the Messina family is seeking to fill their empty storefronts in the **First & Main Marketplace** — not the seasoned businessman, but the dreamer.

The family is calling its push "Local Launch," and they're promising rookie entrepreneurs all the help they need in getting started if they open a shop there — everything from permitting support to marketing and design assistance.

Basically, they're willing to hold someone's hand through the start-up process.

"We knew we had to think outside the box," said Tina Messina, who along with her family runs the longtime North Andover shopping center in downtown formerly called Messinas.

"You can't do business like you could a year ago. We had to get creative," she said.

Messina said the idea came last September when the economy

tanked.

The shopping center, which sits across from Town Hall, had already undergone big changes. Lembo's Marketplace closed its doors in 2006, and many smaller niche shops in the plaza followed suit. The Messinas were in the middle of a \$7 million redesign of the 52,000-square foot center.

They had this beautifully renovated space, but few takers from the big business community.

However, they noticed that many people who were newly laid off from the financial sector, the Lehman Brothers and Fidelity types, were looking to start anew as entrepreneurs. Opening a dream business became a sort of silver lining for them.

"We realized a lot of people out there are changing careers. They're not going back to those financial jobs, because they're not there anymore," Messina said. "A lot of people want to start a business, but they just don't know where to start."

That's where the Messinas would come in.

They say they'll help provide architects, contractors, local resource guidance and town code know-how. They just ask that

people have a business plan and, of course, start-up money.

Messina said most people have no idea about all the intricacies of opening and running a retail business — tiny details like permitting, workmen's compensation, insurances or even the need for a Federal ID code from the government.

"There are a lot of obstacles. With our redesign in full swing, we have all the people on site to help people go through that," Messina said. "Insurance, taxes ... People getting into business wouldn't have a clue."

The plan has gotten kudos from the Merrimack Valley Chamber of Commerce.

"As our economy rebuilds, it will be important for new retailers to have the support they need to make sure their businesses grow and thrive," said Joe Bevilacqua, president of the Chamber.

The family, who runs NA Realty Group, is already in talks with one new business that will use some of the Local Launch services. Messina would not release the name of the business.

She said they are looking for people interested in opening boutiques or cafes — anything that would help bring new life to the

plaza, and the downtown, which is undergoing its own redesign. The Messinas have their own wishlist, evidenced by the signs hanging around the plaza getting people thinking about a possible shoe store, a toy store or a bakery.

One poster, with a toy train adorning it, reads: "Do you dream of mixing work and play?"

The plaza has three to four spaces to fill.

Altogether First & Main Marketplace has space for about 20 tenants. It already houses a CVS pharmacy, Anton's Cleaners, Boston Chowda, Clifford Jewelers and Today's Barber Shop.

"We're hoping this works," Messina said.

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