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Rutland business group offers free downtown rent

*By Ross Sneyd
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(Host) In a bid to draw retailers, a Rutland business group says it will pay a year's worth of rent for a new store that opens downtown.

The Downtown Rutland Partnership says it will make a choice based on the best business plan that's submitted.

VPR's Ross Sneyd reports.

(Sneyd) The Partnership has already received some inquiries from business owners.

The Partnership says it will pay up to \$1,000 a month in rent for a business that starts up or relocates to downtown.

The only catch is that the business needs to sign a three-year lease for the space.

Michael Coppinger is executive director of the Partnership. He says the group will consider all applications, but it's mostly interested in a retail tenant that will draw people to the central business district.

(Coppinger) ``You know, Tattersall's which is on Merchants Row, depends on people coming down to Clem's Café to buy coffee and walk past their windows to see the great clothing that they have for sale there. One hand washes the other and they all depend on each other to drive that foot traffic within our downtown.''

(Sneyd) Coppinger says about 84 percent of the retail space in downtown Rutland is occupied. He says that's pretty close to the national average.

But, in Rutland, many of the vacancies are on Merchants Row, which is the city's showcase.

The Vermont Retailers Association says initiatives such as the Rutland Partnership's are an important vote of faith in local stores.

Tasha Wallis is director of the Retailers Association. She says the incentive of a year's worth of rent could be enough to persuade someone to take the plunge and open a business.

(Wallis) ``I think what they've done is create an opportunity and I think that's something special in the current climate. And I think in any business climate if somebody has the right idea and finds the right niche in the marketplace they can be successful.''

(Sneyd) Rent typically accounts for about ten percent of a retailer's budget. Wallis says payroll and inventory are the larger parts of a store's budget.

She says large regional malls frequently offer retailer's breaks on the rent to lure them or to keep them.

Wallis says downtowns need to do more to keep their anchor tenants.

(Wallis) ``We are concerned about that critical mass you can get when you start to have too many empty storefronts in an area.''

(Sneyd) In Rutland, businesses can apply for the free rent program all this month. A winner will be chosen in February and the goal is for the business to open this spring.
For VPR News, I'm Ross Sneyd.