

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Now the State Supreme Court has found constitutional the Blue Laws requiring most shops and stores to close on Sundays, are we consumers better off or worse?

Apparently a lot of people in Massachusetts, as well as in other states, are of the opinion they can get a "free lunch" and support the notion the Blue Laws are outmoded and ought to be rescinded.

While it may well be true that consumers, given the opportunity, would do more than twenty per cent of their shopping on Sundays, it's entirely possible the extra convenience would end up costing all of us more money.

"Great Service!" say proponents of seven-day openings. "Higher prices!" say the groaning wallets of consumers.

However much more convenient it might be for people to have access to stores seven-days-a-week, there are some facts worth looking at and considering before we complain to our legislators and demand a change in these laws so often called antiquated.

Another shopping day each week won't add one dime to the disposable income of the economy. The breadwinner still brings home a certain amount of cash each week and only so much of it is available to spend for consumer goods.

The same family purchases will be made whether they are spread over six days or seven.

On the other hand, when a store is open daily, its operating costs rise. Each week additional help is needed to serve the public, insurance rates rise, heating and cooling expenses increase.

In states where stores do remain open seven days a week experience has shown the operating costs to be between three and four percent more than for stores which close one day a week.

The stores won't be the ones taking a beating on the increased costs; they'll pass the higher expenses along to the consumer by upping prices. Their only alternative would be managing to attract a larger number of customers and increasing sales.

This could conceivably be achieved -- by some stores and for a short period of time. It might be done by larger department and chain stores. It would, if successful, be done at the expense of the small businessman, the Momma-Poppa shops, that are, if you give it some thought, one of the few vestiges of old Cape Cod charm remaining in our villages.

The small retailer/owner who now puts six-days-a-week into his business and spends Sundays with his family either will remain closed and give up the business to the larger chains, or open and give up his one day of rest, sacrificing his family-life to commerce.

It could be possible -- it just might be possible -- that the small stores are a target of the larger retailers. After all, the total amount of business the many small shops attract is considerable. Seven-day-openings could slowly force the little guy to close shop entirely.

If the large chains were unsuccessful in getting enough of this so-called "extra business", of course, then their prices must rise to cover their additional costs.

Once again, it's the consumer who pays, one way or the other. And no matter what happened if the Blue Laws were overturned, it would be the consumer who would lose in the long run.

What's the reason for patronizing the smaller stores,

anyhow? How do they manage to compete with the giants now?

They all share certain things that make them attractive to local people. They're conveniently located, provide better service, offer a special selection to meet the preferences of their regular customers, and the man who's in business for himself and serves his customers directly rather than through delegates called salesclerks, is really aiming to please.

He greets you by name each time he sees you. When you come in his store, he offers to help you find what you're looking for. He may have to check the storeroom for an item on display, but he doesn't disappear behind a door marked "Employees Only" and remain absent for twenty minutes while you cool your heels and he takes a coffee break.

If you're looking for a shirt with a particular type of collar, he'll show you all of that kind he has in stock, and he'll not try to sell you the kind you don't want. Neither will he shrug his shoulders and tell you "They don't make them that way any more."

Perhaps even in the backroom he doesn't have exactly what you want at the time you're shopping; he will offer to order it for you and when it arrives, he'll call you up and tell you he's got it. If it's a sale item, and by the time he receives it the sale is over, he'll charge you only the amount you'd have had to pay during the sale.

The proprietor of a small retail store has even been known, if you're in dire need and can't wait for an order to come in, to call other stores he knows carry the same lines, and see if he can locate whatever it is you desire. Often, if he's unable to accommodate you, he'll recommend some other store that might have on hand just the thing you're looking for.

Can you imagine a clerk at a department or chain store suggesting you check the competition?

More often than not the sales clerks in large department stores are barely civil. "What can you show me in a shoe something like the ones I'm wearing?" you ask.

"Sorry, lady. Those shoes aren't in style this year." And he shrugs as you wander off with your shoe sole flapping, and feeling dowdy because a shoe salesman has pointed out your attire is out-of-fashion.

It seems we might be wise to think twice before we modernize our Blue Laws and take one more step to emulate New York City suburbia.

On the one hand we're asked to consider seriously doing something to stem the rapidly accelerating tide of deterioration of Downtown Hyannis; on the other hand we're discouraged to pile a final straw on the backs of small businessmen who are fighting for survival against the encroachments of giant department stores and huge chains.

Perhaps we'd be doing ourselves a favor, as taxpayers and townspeople, if we patronized the smaller local shops and encouraged them to stay in business and helped make it possible for them to do so by upholding the present laws.

If we ask ourselves if we'd welcome a branch of one of the larger department stores right in our village, we may begin to appreciate reasons we want to do all we can to help the small businessman make a living in the shops and stores scattered conveniently in the village centers around which our residential areas are clustered.