

https://www.bgdailynews.com/community/sales-pro-webb-still-selling-bowling-green/article_310e42a3-e2d5-56e1-9b91-12ea83ee4f1b.html

Sales pro Webb still selling Bowling Green

By DON SERGENT dsergent@bgdailynews.com

Mar 26, 2023



Entrepreneur and former Bowling Green Mayor Johnny Webb continues to promote his adopted hometown through the “BeautifI-65” project he started as an outgrowth of the Operation PRIDE organization that began 30 years ago.

Submitted

MORE INFORMATION



Sales – whether it’s greeting cards, used cars or school supplies – has been Johnny Webb’s stock-in-trade for more than half a century.

'BeautifI-65'
project wins
statewide
honor

It still is, only now the product the retired businessman is selling is his adopted hometown of Bowling Green.

'Webb Boulevard'
pays tribute to
former mayor

You can see the evidence near the Carter Sims Road bridge spanning Interstate 65, where a colorful, flag-bedecked “southern gateway” stands as the centerpiece of the Operation PRIDE organization’s “BeautifI-65” project.

Or you might see it on a highway anywhere in the country as tractor-trailers roll by with signs touting Bowling Green as Kentucky’s “Best Place to Live.”

Those promotions hyping Bowling Green are both the handiwork of Webb. His tenure as the city’s mayor may have ended in the 1990s, but Webb has never abdicated his role as Bowling Green’s No. 1 advocate and cheerleader.

“I have a passion for Bowling Green,” Webb said. “It’s my home and has been for more than 60 years.”

For Webb, that passion is manifested in the creation of the Operation PRIDE beautification organization during his term as mayor (1992-1995) and in his championing of the “Best Place to Live” signs that now adorn the back doors of more than 1,000 trailers that roam the country from their Bowling Green base.

Both projects grew out of Webb’s brief career in politics that came after he had established success with his Southern School Supply and Parent-Teacher Store businesses.

“I had some friends who came to me (in 1991) looking for somebody to run for mayor,” Webb recalled. “I at first told them no, but then I said I’d think about it.

“They said they needed somebody who could run the city like a business. I never saw myself as a candidate, but I thought I could do that.”

Much like his early business career, Webb’s time as mayor was devoted to selling.

Drawing on his experience building Southern School Supply into a thriving enterprise, Webb made industrial recruitment one of his priorities as mayor.

“I had the privilege of working with several mayors over the years,” said former Bowling Green-Warren County industrial recruiter Dennis Griffin. “Johnny Webb was certainly one of my favorites.

“We had a lot of industrial activity during his time as mayor. Bowling Green was gaining momentum in economic development. It started with (former mayor) Patsy Sloan, then Johnny kept the momentum going. We were fortunate to have his leadership.”

In some ways, Webb’s leadership of city government was a natural outgrowth of his Edmonson County childhood.

His father, Gilbert Webb, owned a general store and was postmaster of the small town of Lindseyville.

“People called him the mayor of Lindseyville,” Webb said of his late father. “He was a businessman and ran the post office. People looked up to him.”

That early exposure to commerce started Webb on his entrepreneurial path.

“I grew up around that general store and learned sales,” he said. “I sold greeting cards, Grit newspapers and other things. That’s where it started.”

Webb’s path to business ownership almost took a detour. After graduating from Edmonson County High School in 1962, he studied economics and sociology at Western Kentucky University and completed teacher certification.

Finding no immediate openings in education, Webb briefly sold cars and then became a top sales representative for 3M products.



That sales success led Webb to take out a \$3,500 loan and start a school-supplies store in 1972. His choice of a name – Southern School Supply – reflected Webb’s confidence that the business would grow beyond Bowling Green.

“I was thinking big,” he said. “I had nothing but an idea, but we had some established clientele and were immediately successful.”

At its height, Southern School Supply carried more than 40,000 items and employed 27 representatives selling those products in seven states.

Webb’s first business later spawned the Parent-Teacher Store that started in Bowling Green but eventually

expanded to nine locations across four states.

He sold Southern School Supply shortly after his one term as mayor expired and sold off the Parent-Teacher Store locations as well.

Webb's impact as a businessman, while significant enough to earn him a spot in the Junior Achievement of Southcentral Kentucky Business Hall of Fame, probably takes a back seat to two of his mayoral initiatives: starting Operation PRIDE and rescuing the aging L&N Depot that is now the Historic Railpark and Train Museum tourist attraction.

Webb convinced former Commonwealth Health Corporation CEO John Desmarais to loan the services of CHC administrator Dan Cherry to start the Operation PRIDE (for Paint, Repair, Improve, Develop and Enjoy) organization that was charged with beautifying Bowling Green.

“Operation PRIDE has had as much of an impact on Bowling Green as anything,” Griffin said. “I’m glad it’s

still active today.”

So active that the organization is undertaking its most ambitious project yet: BeautifI-65.

The project to spruce up the city’s five I-65 interchanges with four-plank fencing and landscaping and to create eye-catching “gateways” near exits 20 and 30 was started in 2019 and last year won the Beautify the Bluegrass Governor’s Award.

Calling on friends and business associates, Webb has raised nearly \$4 million to fund “BeautifI-65”, and about \$300,000 of that has come out of his own pocket.

“I don’t begrudge a penny of it,” he said. “I’m fortunate enough that I can do it.”

After four years, “BeautifI-65” is nearing completion, with some fencing still to be completed and a 9.9-acre site that once was a rest stop being developed as the northern “gateway.”

“The flagpoles are in, and the stone has been ordered,” Webb said. “I’m hoping that by this summer it will be done.”

If “Beautiful-65” is Webb’s crowning achievement in Bowling Green, his work helping saving the L&N Depot comes in a close second.

While mayor, Webb learned that the historic depot building was for sale and that it could possibly be razed.

“They wanted \$125,000 for it, and we got it negotiated down to \$105,000,” Webb said. “I got on the phone and called about 20 people, and every single person I talked to agreed to sign the loan.”

Thanks to Webb’s intervention, the Historic Railpark and Train Museum is today one of Bowling Green’s top tourist attractions and is home base for the new Bowling Green trolley.

“The depot wouldn’t be here today if not for Johnny,” said Mike Buchanon, Webb’s longtime friend and Warren County’s judge-executive from 1994

through 2022. “It would’ve been such a shame if it had been lost. It was within a month of being torn down.”

Buchanon said the train depot, Operation PRIDE, the Kentucky Transpark industrial park and the National Corvette Museum are significant local initiatives that were championed by Webb over the years.

“He’s persuasive, and he has all the right motivation,” Buchanon said.

“For Johnny, it’s all about benefiting the Bowling Green community.”

– *Follow business reporter Don Sergent on Twitter @BGDNbusiness or visit bgdailynews.com.*