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### **ON MAIN STREET, BLACK FRIDAY IS JUST A PRELUDE TO DOWNTOWN DECEMBER**

*Washington, DC* – With the dust settling on Black Friday 2007, the nation's shopping malls and big-box stores have reported modest sales increases over last year's day-after-Thanksgiving sales (7.2 percent for the combined Friday-Saturday period, according to the International Council of Shopping Centers).

For businesses in America's historic main streets, however, Black Friday was a mixed bag – but, according to experts, that's okay.

"Overall, the busiest days of the holiday shopping season for businesses in older and historic main streets usually happen in the two weeks before Christmas," according to Kennedy Smith with the Community Land Use and Economics Group (CLUE Group), an Arlington, Virginia-based community economic development research and consulting firm. "There are some main street merchants who do exceptionally well on Black Friday – but for reasons quite different from those of the malls and discounters."

The CLUE Group surveyed 509 retailers in older and historic main street districts throughout the United States about their experiences on 2007's Black Friday. Those surveyed represented 140 historic commercial districts, stretching across the country from Carlsbad, California to Barre, Vermont and ranging in size from Berlin, Ohio (pop. 650) to neighborhood commercial corridors in Baltimore, Boston, San Antonio, and Los Angeles. The survey was distributed with the assistance of the National Main Street Center, a program of

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the nonprofit National Trust for Historic Preservation that helps communities revitalize historic downtowns and neighborhood commercial centers.

According to Smith, the survey revealed two strong patterns.

“First, Black Friday is not the strongest sales day of the year for main street businesses,” Smith said. “Only eight percent of main street businesses report that the day after Thanksgiving is their best sales day. Second, main street businesses that *do* report strong sales on Black Friday appear to be appealing to shoppers who don’t like the crowds and confusion associated with the deep-discount frenzy at malls and superstores. Main streets offer a more relaxed and personalized environment, and some shoppers prefer that.”

Most main street businesses surveyed reported that their busiest day of the year is usually a day in December, and usually a Saturday one or two weeks before Christmas. A few reported that their busiest day is Christmas Eve. A store owner in Baltimore, Maryland said, “I think many people go for electronic and tech gadgets they can only get at the chain stores. Then they shop here in my neighborhood store for unique items all the way through December 24.” A business from Osceola, Iowa reported that its busiest day is “One or two days before Christmas, after [customers] have been to the big box stores and can’t find what they are looking for, and find out we have it at the same or cheaper price.”

Other key survey findings:

- The percentage of main street businesses that reported higher sales on Black Friday this year is virtually the same as the percentage that reported lower sales. “The businesses that reported higher sales tended to be those that offered products or experiences that malls and big-box stores don’t offer,” Smith said. She cited the examples of a children’s store in Iowa that featured an author reading and signing books and of a home furnishings store in Maryland that offered free hot cider and a live guitarist. “Those are memorable experiences that stores like Wal-Mart simply don’t offer.”
- Forty-six percent of main street businesses who offered discounts said their Black Friday sales were lower this year than last, but 35 percent reported higher sales. For many, discounts – combined with something unique or fun – were successful. In one Texas gift store, customers popped balloons to see what their discounts would be. An Illinois

jewelry store sends out a promotional mailing with a \$50 coupon. A Kansas gift store offers a coupon good for 25 percent off any one item.

- A higher percentage of main street book stores, electronics stores, gift stores, and grocery stores reported that Black Friday sales were up from last year than any other types of retail stores.

Smith stressed the importance of older commercial districts organizing activities throughout the winter shopping season – even on Black Friday.

“Sadly, a number of survey respondents said their districts simply threw in the towel and organized nothing for Black Friday,” she said.

The Community Land Use and Economics Group (CLUE Group) is a small, specialized economic development research and consulting firm that helps community leaders, developers and civic organizations create economically and culturally vibrant downtowns, measure the economic impact of development alternatives, and find innovative solutions to preserving historic buildings. Founded in 2004 by former senior staff of the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s National Main Street Center, the CLUE Group works with clients in the US, Canada and the United Kingdom.

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## **Black Friday Downtown: Comments from the Survey**

Glendora, California: "This is not the time to offer discounts. Our merchandise is FOR sale, not ON sale."

Newhall, California: "I realize it's just assumed that Black Friday has more to do with shopping malls than small shops in the downtown district, but it doesn't mean that an all-out concerted effort should not be made to draw shoppers, including pointing out the advantages of shopping with us over the madhouse at malls...including prices, selection, parking, safety, etc."

Niantic, Connecticut: "We have successfully turned a mediocre day into a day that brings people to us after their early am trips to the big boxes. We open at 10 to not compete and we get very busy from 11 on."

Geneva, Illinois: "I believe the early hours and sales of big box stores are a detriment to the smaller retailer on Black Friday, but after Black Friday we nail 'em!"

Hoisington, Kansas: "I think people are just tired of the big box mania and looking for something different. This years Black Friday was a good one for us but nothing was really different from last year, so I think people are just tired of the crowds and bother."

McPherson, Kansas: "I think consumers look to the big box retailers and malls on Black Friday. That's who is doing most of the advertising for that day. But to get to those stores in our area means they have to travel out of town (30-60 miles). We probably saw an increase in traffic just because people have been compelled to shop (from the saturation of Black Friday ads) but didn't want to spend money on gas to do it. The benefits of Black Friday for us was a trickle-down of the national ad push and not a result of anything we did. We opened at 10am, with no sale and no advertising. Business as usual... only better!"

Georgetown, Kentucky: "My total weekend was great. That includes Wednesday, Friday (the lowest), and Saturday. Our people get tired of congestion and come home."

Hastings, Nebraska: "The day used to be busy years ago (though never the busiest day), but now we leave it to the big boys and their 4:00 am doorbusters."

Montrose, Pennsylvania: "You have to advertise. Do an Open House...dip samplings, coffee sampling, GWP,s. Free Gift Wrap. Extended hours. Emphasize those features which make local shopping different than big-box...customer service, customer service, customer service."

Summerville, South Carolina: "People that visit our area for Black Friday are not in it for "super deals" I believe they want to enjoy their shopping and enjoy the downtown atmosphere."

New Braunfels, Texas: "We do not offer specials nor discounts as do the big retailers, as we don't want to 'train' our customers to expect them and thus wait for them."

Round Rock, Texas: "Black Friday is our slowest day of the year."

Bradford, Vermont: "Downtowns should not even attempt to compete in this shopping frenzy. Doing so only brings the downtown "image" down to the Walmart level and ultimately will be counterproductive."

Leesburg, Virginia: "Weekend after Thanksgiving has always been a good few days in terms of sales, but has never proven to be HUGE due to the many sales being promoted at the outlets, big box stores, etc. that's okay, I'm not into heavy discounting to attract loyal customers."

Vienna, Virginia: "It's usually a big browsing weekend, people just starting to get ideas for Christmas gifts, not necessarily buying."