

Royal Oak goes 3-D

Virtual marketing program will showcase county's downtowns

By Christy Strawser
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ROYAL OAK — You can almost hear burgers sizzle on the grill at the Royal Oak Brewery on a groundbreaking cyber city tour Oakland County unveiled Tuesday morning.

Royal Oak-based Virtualeyes donated \$80,000 in free work to construct a program communities all over the region can eventually use to promote themselves to vacation seekers and business owners around the world.

Virtualeyes unveiled its first 3-D model Tuesday; it simulates downtown Royal Oak in such computerized detail that black tape is visible on the plywood that covers windows at the former Joe's Army Navy on Main Street.

"Welcome to Star Wars," said Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson as Main Street unfolded on a large screen in the county's Information Technology office.

Royal Oak was the first city to get the 3-D treatment. Rochester and Pontiac will

W elcome to
Star Wars.

— L. Brooks
Patterson,
Oakland County
executive

quickly follow, and the county expects others to get on board soon. Oakland County partnered with Virtualeyes, founded by 33-year-old Michael Medalia in his Royal Oak house, to bring the latest in technology to its downtowns.

Patterson said this marks the first time any community in the country has used a virtual computer program for marketing.

"The purpose of this virtual reality tour is to showcase the downtown, individual businesses and new development projects in a unique advertising format that has incredible reach," Patterson said.

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Rosh Sillars/Daily Tribune

The Royal Oak Brewery was the first business to join a new kind of virtual reality tour meant to promote local towns and businesses to Web surfers around the world.

3D

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The program looks like a video game and lets visitors wander an exact model of downtown Royal Oak complete with detailed business facades. Visitors can click on a business to virtually walk inside, check out the interior, feel the ambiance and then move next door.

Virtualeyes has visitors choose categories like nightlife, shopping, and health and beauty, or lets people wander downtown and stop at any place that piques their interest.

The county invited only its Main Street program participants to join the reality tour at first, but Virtualeyes staff said they expect many others around the county to get involved.

Business owners like Jack Hanna, creator of the Fifth development on Washington, applauded the program for bringing Royal Oak to the "cutting edge" of technology while Kristi Trevarrow of the Royal Oak Brewery said her company is excited about the new marketing opportunity.

The Brewery was the first Oakland County business to buy into the cyber pro-

gram, which costs \$500 a year to join. The restaurant posted its menu, photos of the interior and even an interactive tour on the new site.

Any downtown business in a participating community that does not pay the fee will be featured only by exterior.

"We found they (customers) aren't satisfied just looking at a brochure," Trevarrow said. "We're really excited about this."

Hanna also went an extra step with his involvement and put his new development on the tour site with different floor plans and a panoramic view that exactly depicts Royal Oak from upper floor balconies. Web visitors who stop at the Fifth will get to choose a floor plan, pick the floor color, cabinet style and walk through like they're paying an actual visit to the new Royal Oak development.

It's a way to sell the development to potential re-locators from anywhere in the world, and its designer thinks the project will only get bigger and more detailed.

Medalia, a former car company computer model developer, said he struck on

the idea when preparing for a trip to Florida last year:

"I was on my way down to the Keys and I was thinking 'What if I hadn't been here before?'," Medalia said. "I thought 'I bet I could put together city tours.' Then I went home and built Royal Oak."

He got business partners, sold his idea to Oakland County, and hopes to make models of cities all over the world for his unique Web site. Virtualeyes.net has the Royal Oak tour while links on local business sites and Oakland County's Web site direct visitors to the interactive tour.

"The Las Vegas strip is next," Medalia said. "Then it's southern California beach communities like Santa Monica."

Medalia hopes to move his brainchild out of the house and into a larger facility when more customers come on board. Oakland County has seven Main Street program members among its 32 downtowns and Patterson said he hopes all communities with a downtown eventually belong to Main Street — and the interactive tour.

The county will accept two more com-

munities this fall into the Main Street program that allows upwardly mobile downtown leaders to get input on improving their city centers. Main Street sends consultants to every member community to evaluate the quality of their downtown and help devise programs to make member downtowns successful.

Royal Oak won top honors in this year's Main Street program. The south end city garnered \$33.7 million, more than a third of all the downtown investment generated through the county program in 2003, according to statistics released in June.

Pontiac came in second with \$23.8 million, and Rochester third with \$22.6 million.

Ferndale was the only other local community to earn an invitation to Oakland County's Main Street program in 2001, but the city was dropped in March after manager Tom Barwin verbally scuffled with Patterson on an I-75 expansion project.

Ferndale officials said they hope to re-join the program soon.

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