Rising Allentown shines on Small Business Saturday

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By Len Boselovic / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The owners of Spool Fabric Shop spent their first Small Business Saturday hosting Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto at their Warrington Avenue store in Pittsburgh’s Allentown neighborhood, telling him the assistance they received from the city and community development groups is spurring redevelopment in the business district.

“We found people who were really interested in helping us out here,” said co-owner Jennifer Swartzwelder, who opened the store in September with co-owner Michelle Lancet.

Mr. Peduto toured Allentown businesses Saturday, a day when consumers across the nation were urged to shop at neighborhood small businesses. Before coming to Spool, Mr. Peduto was across the street at Leon’s Caribbean Restaurant, another new enterprise.

The Allentown Community Development Corp. and the Hilltop Alliance, nonprofit groups that are overseeing a $1.5 million project intended to revitalize the business district over the next six years, helped organize the tour. The project is part of the state Department of Community and Economic Development’s Neighborhood Partnership Program. It is also funded by contributions from Dollar Bank, PNC Bank and UPMC Health Plan.

“This neighborhood is definitely on its way back,” said Ms. Lancet, a former health care researcher.

She and Ms. Swartzwelder, a portrait photographer who still does some work in that profession, started Spool online a year before leasing space in a Warrington Avenue building that had long been vacant.

Part of Spool’s rent for their showroom is paid through a rent abatement program funded by an anonymous donor and administered by the Allentown CDC and the Hilltop Alliance. Ms. Swartzwelder said their business also received a grant for signs and their storefront.
“Our goal was always to do brick and mortar,” said Ms. Lancet, who grew up in the neighborhood.

During his visit to their store, Mr. Peduto announced what he called an “online playbook for small businesses.” The guide is intended to help entrepreneurs find property available through the city or its Urban Redevelopment Authority.