

“We’ve a lot of requests for shop space”

While Differdange commune ended 2020 with a €5.5m deficit due to the pandemic, it continues to invest in initiatives and measures to ensure a sustainable economy. Alderman **Laura Pregno** (Green party) explains.

How did the pandemic impact Differdange's high street or exacerbate existing problems?

There were some closures, but always shops that weren't doing well before. Or they took a personal decision to close. We had three or four throughout Differdange, so it was relatively few.

It's difficult, we've large retail chains in the mall and, on the other hand, in the town centre we've small independent shops. The link between the new and old distraction isn't ideal. The commune is trying to promote the centre: it's small and there's a park. We hope once people come, they will see what's there and want to spend some money there.

And how has the commune responded?

We did what all towns did, we expanded the perimeter of [restaurant] terraces to give more space between tables. We are also marking out the pedestrian zone, people are more comfortable eating outside if there are fewer cars. We're redesigning the centre with moveable pillars, giving a more secure access.

Another thing we did was offering financial help. We presented at the last meeting €250,000 for shops in Differdange, distributed based on a list of criteria.

The commune recently surveyed residents on the mix of shops. What are the findings and next steps?

More clothing shops, sport and everything related to home improvement: gardens and household stuff. That's what people would like to have in Differdange and it's what's missing. I hope that we will have contacts with entrepreneurs and shops who want to settle here.

Is there a strong interest from residents wanting to start a business in Differdange?

We've a lot of requests for shop spaces. Unfortunately, we don't have enough to meet the demand, so we keep a waiting list.



Laura Pregno is Differdange alderman for trade and the environment

How is the digital transition for business coming along?

We tried to get shopkeepers to adapt to e-commerce, with platforms like Letzshop, but there wasn't a big response. I have the impression that they're not all ready to make this leap towards digitalisation. We had a project with cargo bikes to make deliveries for e-shops. But we had a lot of difficulty. Eventually, they will have to take the plunge.

I believe security was an issue long before the pandemic. What is the commune's strategy here?

We've changed street lighting. There are more places to sit, also in the park. We've planted lots of flowers. We work on the wellbeing aspect. We hope people will see it's clean and pretty and they will come more often.

What about private security?

We employed a private firm to give a certain feeling of safety to the population and monitor places. They close playgrounds and the cemeteries at night. I think there will be a debate on this subject. But the commune appreciated their presence, which made people feel safer. Otherwise, we've street workers to support people on the street. Also, we work closely with the police.

Tell me about the holiday homes you're renovating.

Differdange isn't well known for tourism but it is surrounded by greenery. We have Fond-de-Gras and Lasauvage, where we can offer a green and family-focused tourism, for one or two days. We've five small houses, former workers' homes, in Lasauvage. It's a different kind of tourism to diversify the offer and be ready for Esch2022. ■

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