

Youth Junction ready to make waves

by JIM DAVID

Elmira youth looking for a place to hang out on main street need not take up unwelcome space on someone's lawn — they are more than welcome at Youth Junction.

"We are hoping to reach out to some of the kids that are downtown wishing for something to do," said Bruce Weber, a congregation member of Zion Mennonite Church, which has taken up new residence in the former Shopeasy store.

The kids coming to Youth Junction meet in the church basement Wed. and Thurs. nights, from 7:30 to 10:30. There is a pool table, a ping-pong table, a radio, and plenty of chairs just to sit on and chat. All items have been donated.

Weber said that is the goal of Youth Junction: allowing kids to hang out and just be themselves. They can do what they want (under the watchful eye of a congregation member), but Weber is quick to point out that supervision will not be strict.

The only rule in the book — along with the standard ones of no alcohol, drugs or swearing — is to treat everyone with respect or as you would want to be treated yourself.

Weber also said the goal of Youth Junction is not to get teens into the building and start preaching to them.

"We're not here to push Christianity down their throats," Weber said, adding

that if anyone does ask what the church is all about, someone will explain the Christian perspective of the church.

However, Weber stressed that Youth Junction is a place for youth. He is hoping the fact that the hangout is in a church will not scare anyone away.

"We're just hoping they come down here and find something to do and not be bored downtown."

Weber said if Youth Junction attracts 10 to 15 teens, he will be happy. If more show up, there is the possibility of expanding the program to more nights.

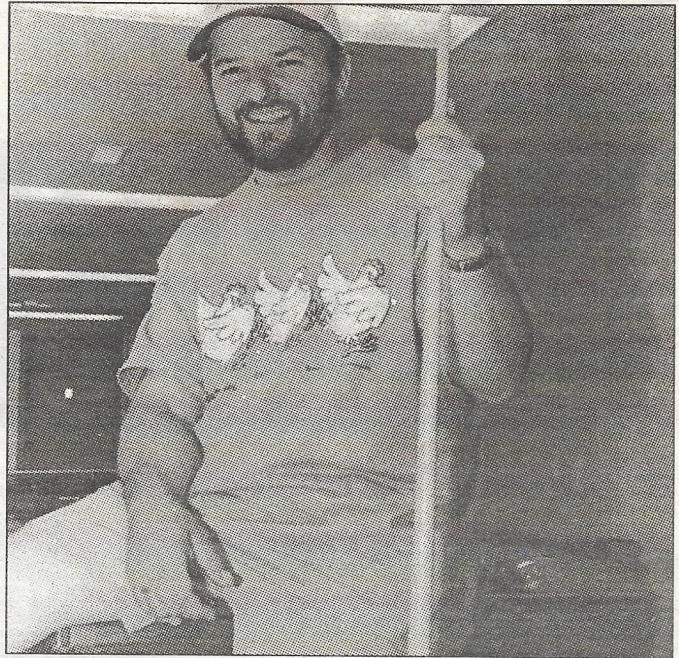
Youth Junction, Weber stressed, is not in competition with the Elmira Boys' and Girls' Club which, he said, has much more vigorous plans, including a possible weight-room and actual programs for kids.

"Our goal isn't to meet the need of every kid downtown," he said, adding that Youth Junction is set to meet the needs of teens who do not like sports or other structured activities. (Youth Junction's plan was discussed with organizers of the Boys' and Girls' Club.)

Weber also noted that the majority of teens in Elmira are good; it is just a few who seem to be causing trouble and making headlines. Weber said no one reads anything about the other teens because they are doing other things and not getting into trouble.

Youth Junction is part of The Junction — the name for Zion Mennonite Church, at 47 Arthur St. S.

There is also the Play Junction, a facility for young



A DOWNTOWN PRESENCE — Bruce Weber hopes Elmira teens will find a new place to hang out: downtown, at Youth Junction.

children, which is open Fridays. It offers downtown shoppers the opportunity to leave their children there for an hour or so. It is filled with toys: a sure remedy for a child's boredom.

Weber said the Play Junction has been a hit with parents and children alike. In fact, the whole congregation at Zion (about 50 in all) is walking on Cloud 9. Moving into its new main-street church has been a nine-year dream that has finally come to fruition.

The congregation had been holding its services in the Legion, but the out-of-the-way location and the desire to have more of a community presence led members to take a bold step: having a place of their own.

"We're excited about it and revitalized by it," Weber

said, noting that the Legion and its people were accommodating, but the congregation was ready to move and grow.

Anyone with doubts had to swallow hard when they first saw the condition of the Shopeasy store.

"A lot of work went into this place," Weber said, adding that Zion members did all the work themselves, except for the plumbing. "The first time we walked in here with our Bibles instead of our hammers, it felt pretty funny."

The Junction has been open about three weeks.

The Play Junction and Youth Junction are also open, serving notice that Zion Mennonite Church will continue with its new mandate: "We want to be a presence downtown."