

Giving downtown Dallas a neighborhood feel - Revitalization making progress, but it's not easy or cheap

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Few people love downtown Dallas more than Don Raines.

He moved into a Main Street apartment when hardly anyone lived in the center city's core. Later, he became president of the Downtown Dallas Residents Council, a position he still holds.

Except Mr. Raines doesn't live downtown anymore.

"I've been renting for years, and when I wanted to buy, I couldn't find anything with the space I needed that was in my price range. The homeowners' dues were outrageous," said Mr. Raines, who purchased a north Oak Cliff townhouse on the banks of the Trinity River but keeps an office in downtown's Kirby Building.

His decision comes as downtown faces the larger challenge of building upon several years of rapid growth to create a more livable environment.

Within months, city officials expect to hit the halfway point on their quest to fill the downtown core with 10,000 residential units - up from about 200 a decade ago. Long-vacant office buildings have been transformed into affluent apartment towers with million-dollar views, while once-empty storefronts now sport retail ranging from clothiers and restaurants to workout clubs and a winery.

Even families - with babies and dogs - are moving into what's transitioning from a listless commercial center to a bona fide urban neighborhood with such amenities as wine bars, dry cleaners, supermarkets and parks.

"You'd always have people say, 'No one goes downtown.' We wanted to change that perception," said Zane Aveton, who lives in a large downtown loft with her husband and young son. Last year, Ms. Aveton opened Sedona Spa for Women in the 1600 block of Main Street and says she's regularly adding clients.

"Downtown is still in limbo, but we're so on the very edge of limbo. People need to continue to believe and invest," she said.

But the transformation is neither easy nor cheap: Dallas City Hall has endowed developers with hundreds of millions of dollars worth of direct subsidies and tax breaks to gamble on downtown. It's kept some retail establishments operating with direct infusions of public money.

And now that several thousand people live there, many find themselves grappling with the sort of urban annoyances that can make downtown living hard: the nighttime noise of Dumpster emptying and anti-pigeon devices; aggressive panhandlers; housing prices soaring through the penthouse roof.

"The lifeblood of a city - and a city's neighborhoods - is families," said Timothy J. Bray, director of the J. McDonald Williams Institute, a Dallas-based urban issues think tank. "The city should focus on neighborhood development, not just property development."

Hotel is key

Dallas Mayor Tom Leppert acknowledges that challenges remain before downtown reaches its potential to provide within a decade a better experience for workers, residents and revelers than Fort Worth's Sundance Square, the regional model for downtown renewal.

"Can it surpass it? Absolutely. I want this to be a downtown that people think of among the best downtowns in the nation," Mr. Leppert said.

His keys to that goal: Building a publicly subsidized convention center hotel, connecting disparate parts of downtown via transportation links and retail corridors, and mitigating problems caused by crime, panhandling and an atmosphere still geared more toward commerce than home life.

City Council member Angela Hunt, whose District 14 includes much of the center city, says a second downtown Dallas Area Rapid Transit line and a trolley-car circulator are critical to maintaining downtown growth, as are three planned parks and a potential expansion of the popular Katy Trail to the Arts District.

"Linking these various venues creates a synergy we've never had before - and really need," she said.

As part of a briefing scheduled for today, Mr. Leppert will announce the creation of a mayor's task force on downtown issues to grapple with such challenges. How to shepherd downtown from "a city with strong anchors but lacking connectivity" will be among its charges.

Flurry of activity

Downtown is expected to experience a flurry of activity in the coming months, beginning with the grand opening this week of Mosaic, a 440-unit apartment complex on Akard Street and Pacific Avenue in a building that had been vacant for more than 15 years.

Several other large residential projects are slated to open within months, including the Third Rail Lofts on the corner of Main and Akard streets, where a Chase bank branch and CVS Pharmacy are already operating within the old Gulf States Building storefront.

Then there's the Mercantile Bank complex, with its 33-story clock tower that for more than a decade housed little more than birds and rats. After several failed development plans, the City Council in 2005 approved a \$250 million redevelopment deal - including about \$70 million in public subsidies - to convert the city block it sits on into apartments and retail.

The city, however, doesn't have unlimited funds, Mr. Leppert said.

A convention center hotel, a project the city has long lusted after, would require significant public financing to work, he said. If and when the city closes a deal to build a hotel, the cash flow out of City Hall would likely slow to a trickle, he said.

"We're going to have to have the market and the demand dictate where to go," Mr. Leppert said.

Besides, public incentives aren't necessarily a guarantee of success.

"No incentive can make a bad store good," said Chip Rogers, senior vice president at Buxton Corp. in Fort Worth, which specializes in finding retail locations.

The sweet spot

The corner of Main and Akard streets, in many ways, is ground zero for downtown's rebirth and provides the most specific examples of a burgeoning neighborhood.

"We saw what was happening, and we were wanting to be a part of it before it took off and got too expensive," said Jonn Pierre Baudoin, general manager and partner of the Dallas Fish Market restaurant at 1509 Main St.

The Dallas Restaurant Group opened the restaurant in July. On Friday afternoon, Mr. Baudoin juggled walk-in patrons asking about the sushi bar and answering the phone to take reservations and give directions.

Business has been strong. Downtown's corps of executives frequently fill the restaurant's banquet space, and the kitchen often caters events at other downtown businesses, such as last Thursday's InCircle event at Neiman Marcus down the street.

Down the block, Benji's Collezione sells clothing and accessories in a cozy boutique that founder MaryAnn Woods-Osifo once ran from a suburban storefront two years ago.

"We believe in the city and what's happening ... but the subsidies created a bit more comfort with the move," Ms. Woods-Osifo said. Though business was a "little slow in the beginning," revenues at the shop are up 20 percent since it opened downtown.

At 1517 Main St., her retail neighbor, Thomas Fankam, has big plans for the Magic Market, which he bought from its previous owner in July. The market, which sells an array of convenience-store goods "looks like a dollar store," said Mr. Fankam, a recent immigrant from Cameroon. "It's not going to be that."

As construction workers and valet parkers dropped in to buy bottles of iced tea or bags of potato chips, he talked about opening a bookstore - which would be a first downtown - in the market, which he has renamed WW International, after his parents.

Challenges remain

As managing attorney at Legal Aid of Northwest Texas' downtown office since 2003, Kervyn Altaffer Jr. has a perspective on downtown redevelopment like few others.

On his way home in the evenings, he once was confronted by burglar bars obscuring the view into Main Street businesses. Today, those views are now of groups of friends or co-workers enjoying happy hour or dinner together at bars - the drinking kind.

"It's like a neighborhood," he said. "In the summer, there are concerts and movie showings."

Aside from Neiman Marcus, the legal services agency, which opened downtown in 1991, has one of Main Street's longest tenures.

While business owners say they are happy with being part of downtown's revitalization, they add that City Hall can help them in little ways.

For the Dallas Fish Market, it's expediting a planned move of the bus stop in front of the restaurant to provide a more customer-friendly spot for valet service. Mr. Altaffer would like the city to restore the handicapped parking space - much used by the legal services' disabled clients - in front of the building.

David and Mary Anne Alhadeff have called 1505 Elm St. home for two years and love easy access to downtown restaurants, the Arts District and Urban Market - the only supermarket in the center city.

Still, Mr. Alhadeff feels the city could do more to make both residents and visitors feel more secure.

"Dallas needs more police down here on the streets, particularly at night," he said. "And I think a year or two from now, it'll be like a real city, where if you wanted to make a day of it, you could."

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RECIPE FOR A VIBRANT DOWNTOWN

City officials say the following steps are necessary to create a robust downtown filled with businesses, residents and recreational and cultural offerings:

-Build a hotel adjacent to the Dallas Convention Center. City officials say one is necessary to attract top-flight convention business - and would probably require heavy public subsidy. Plans in the works for several years have yet to materialize, but Mayor Tom Leppert is pushing hard for a deal.

-Connect the "dots" with rail transportation and other links, such as trails and parks. The dots include the Dallas Convention Center, West End, Victory Park, Farmers Market and Uptown. With these downtown anchors linked, the downtown center, such as the Main Street District, would thrive.

-Reduce loitering, crime and panhandling attributed to homeless people. The city's \$23 million Homeless Assistance Center, scheduled to open next year, should help. But it won't be a cure-all. Stricter enforcement of anti-panhandling and sleeping-in-streets ordinances is needed. And homeless people must be given better options for mental health care, addiction treatment and stable housing.

-Create more affordable housing. Downtown condominium and apartment prices are fast growing out of reach for workaday Dallasites.

DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT

The intersection of Main and Akard streets is one of the most turbulent - and promising - examples of redevelopment in downtown Dallas. The blocks immediately east and west of the intersection have undergone significant changes this decade - a few addresses for the worst, but most for the better. Among them:

1618 MAIN

What's there: Neiman Marcus' flagship store and headquarters

Significance: One of downtown's oldest businesses, Neiman's refused to leave even during downtown's darkest days, when almost all other retailers fled.

1608 MAIN

What's there: An empty storefront

Significance: Prime spot for a business - it's next to Neiman's, and a recently added walkway connects Main and Commerce streets.

1604/1602 MAIN

What's there: An empty storefront and building several stories tall

Significance: Still one of Main Street's uglier properties.

1530/1520 MAIN

What's there: The new Hotel Elan and a Charlie Palmer Restaurant are slated to open within months.

Significance: They'll occupy a tall renovated tower that's been empty for years.

1516 MAIN

What's there: Iron Cactus, a three-story Mexican restaurant, is now one of Main Street's most popular eateries. In its basement: Mantus Ultralounge, which recently replaced a defunct deli.

Significance: A successful development where there was effectively nothing just four years ago.

MAIN AND AKARD

(southeast corner)

What's there: Pegasus Plaza, a public meeting and event space

Significance: With several parks still in the planning phase, this is among the largest public places of its kind downtown.

1412 MAIN

What's there: The Adolphus Tower with a Pegasus Credit Union storefront

Significance: The tall office building has a relatively high vacancy rate but sits in a prime location.

1410 MAIN

What's there: A Which Wich sandwich shop and Tops Seafood and Hamburgers

Significance: Packed on weekdays, the restaurants have been mainstays for years.

1404 1/2 MAIN

What's there: An empty retail space

Significance: The Mandalay Chinese Restaurant, which lasted about four years, is no more.

1404 MAIN

What's there: Zodiac Greek Grill

Significance: One of the longer-operating lunch spots on Main Street.

1402 MAIN

What's there: City Tavern, a two-story bar and grill open all day

Significance: With wood paneling and a good beer selection, this relative newcomer looks as if it's been plucked from a corner in Boston or Philadelphia.

1400 MAIN

What's there: An empty storefront

Significance: Formerly home to the Euphoria nightclub, it's sat vacant for a few years.

1315 COMMERCE STREET

(rear storefront)

What's there: Ten Sports Grill, in the back of the Hotel Adolphus

Significance: Open for a couple of years, it's stayed afloat - and stays open late.

MAIN AND FIELD STREETS

(southeast corner)

What's there: Antone Café

Significance: Well-patronized lunch spot

MAIN AND FIELD STREETS

(northeast corner)

What's there: An empty storefront

Significance: Used to be Café Ravenna until a couple months ago; posted signs say it's under renovation

1301 MAIN

What's there: An empty storefront

Significance: Under renovation, slated to house a bar called Thoth

1309 MAIN

What's there: The Davis Building apartment tower, with storefronts housing Swirll Winery and Clear Ultra Lounge

Significance: One of downtown's older buildings, Davis was among the first to undergo an office-to-residential conversion. Swirl and Clear are thriving, but a neighboring high-end furniture store closed after about two years in business.

1407 MAIN

What's there: New residential lofts and a parking garage on the verge of opening, with a CVS Pharmacy and Jason's Deli in its storefronts

Significance: A parking lot until two years ago, but a new structure now occupies about one-fourth of the block.

1415 MAIN

What's there: The Gulf States Building and a Chase bank branch

Significance: After a full renovation from vacant office building to Third Rail Lofts apartment complex, this former eyesore is again filled with life.

1509 MAIN

What's there: The Kirby Building apartment tower and the newly opened Dallas Fish Market

Significance: The Kirby, originally built in 1913, became an apartment building in 1999 after extensive renovations. The Dallas Fish Market replaces Jeroboam, which closed last year.

1511 MAIN

What's there: Benji's Collezioni, a boutique clothier

Significance: One of the newest retail stores in downtown, aided by city retail recruitment subsidies.

1515 MAIN

What's there: Legal Aid of North Texas building

Significance: Office building with a long-time occupant

1517 MAIN

What's there: Magic Market

Significance: Small convenience store with basic offerings

1519 MAIN

What's there: H&M Resources

1521 Main

What's there: St. Jude Chapel

Significance: The small, storefront Catholic church caters to businesspeople and, more recently, downtown residents.

1520 ELM STREET (rear)

What's there: Sol Irlandés Mexican restaurant

Significance: Good food and an outdoor patio, but the third restaurant operating at this location in four years

1601 MAIN

What's there: The Praetorian Building, with Roma Express Pizza in its storefront

Significance: Nearly 100 years old, the 14-story building sits empty. It's slated to become residential units.

1602-B MAIN

What's there: Obar, a subterranean lounge

Significance: Stylish bar that opened in 2004, replacing another lounge, Umlaut, which opened in 2001

1607 MAIN

What's there: An empty storefront

1611 MAIN

What's there: Sedona Fitness Spa

Significance: The fitness center is operated by a downtown resident, and it replaced an empty storefront.

1615 MAIN

What's there: An empty storefront

1623 MAIN

What's there: The Post Wilson Building and Porta di Roma restaurant in its storefront

Significance: Built in 1904, the building was converted into 135 apartments in 1999 - among the earliest such projects downtown.

Dave Levinthal

Caption: PHOTO(S): 1-2. (SONYA N. HEBERT/Staff Photographer) 1. Zane Aveton (right) and her husband, Noel, turned a former printing shop into a home. They live there with Beau, 3. "You'd always have people say, 'No one goes downtown.' We wanted to change that perception," Ms. Aveton said. 2. Megan Sukduang, who lives with husband Suriyun in the Buzz Lofts on Akard Street, likes being able to zip from home to work at Sedona Spa for Women and back again on her moped - which came with her condo. 3-4. (JIM MAHONEY/Staff Photographer) 3. Mosaic, a 440-unit apartment complex, will open this week in a building that had been been vacant for 15 years. 4. While downtown redevelopment thrives, there is still a lot of work to do, as a hole in a Main Street building attests. CHART(S): 1. RECIPE FOR A VIBRANT DOWNTOWN 2.DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT MAP(S): (BETSY BOCK/Staff Artist) DOWNTOWN DALLAS - Main Street Development

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