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DOWNTOWN BISMARCK

A HOT SPOT FOR COMMERCE, SOCIALIZATION AND URBAN LIVING

By Kylie Blanchard, Clearwater Communications

Bismarck's Downtown has experienced steady growth in recent years and is now becoming a hot spot for commerce, socialization and urban living. And according to the Bismarck Downtowners Association, this type of revitalization is taking place across the country. "After malls opened in the early 1970s, downtowns across the country lost their anchor retailers and fell into a sleepy state," says Kate Herzog, the Downtowners marketing and assistant director. "Nationally downtowns are coming back, and Bismarck is no exception."

Herzog attributes this resurgence in part to private-public programs like the state's Renaissance Zone and the city's CORE tax incentive programs, which have contributed to the completion of approximately 100 Downtown projects. This, in turn, has created nearly \$100 million in private investments, hundreds of full-time jobs, and more than 50 new businesses to Bismarck's Downtown.

"The two programs also have a great rate of return. On average, the incentives are generally recouped in four to six years. After which, the property or business generates higher property and sales tax for decades to come," she says. "Downtowns tend to be the most tax efficient part of a community, producing a lot of tax due to the density and mixed-use development."

Herzog notes not all Downtown projects use the incentives, but all revitalization projects contribute greatly to the vibrancy of the area. "Either route a project takes, Downtown has made leaps and bounds in the last dozen years."

Supporting Growth

Many additional factors have contributed to the growth of Downtown Bismarck, including the community's stable and growing economy. "Our city and Downtown are on the national radar," says Brenda Smith, Bismarck City Commissioner and co-chair of the Downtown Subarea Implementation Task Force. "Investors see Bismarck as a growing, dynamic city with many opportunities for good rates of return."

A study was completed of Bismarck's Downtown this year and recently accepted by the Bismarck City Commission, which proposed making \$22.5 million in improvements to Downtown within five years. "A task force was established by the City Commission to implement the study," says Smith. "The private sector has also been very involved and committed to implementing this plan."

"The Downtown Master Plan is a key component to Downtown Bismarck's growth in the next five years," adds Herzog. "From ambitious projects like the Depot Plaza, to redesigns of streets and corridors, this will set the tone for development."

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The full Downtown Master Plan can be viewed at www.downtownbismarckstudy.com.

New businesses are also being drawn to Downtown by the changing community dynamics. "North Dakotans are very entrepreneurial, and our state's economy has been recognized as one of the best places to start a new business," adds Herzog.

This has created a number of employment opportunities, in particular for young professionals. "Young professionals prefer a vibrant community core in cities where they work and live. We've seen young professionals start to migrate back to Bismarck-Mandan after experiencing unique urban communities elsewhere. This has created solid forward momentum for development and expansion."

David Diebel, owner of D&N Cinematics, opened his business in Downtown Bismarck in July 2012. "We really like being a part of the Downtown atmosphere. We work here and we have fun here," he says. "There is an energy, and we like being a part of it."

Diebel moved back to Bismarck in 2010 following college and says Downtown has changed immensely since then. "There is a lot of vibrancy in the area and now more arts, culture, entertainment and restaurants. More and more small businesses like ours are also choosing Downtown locations."

He says being a part of the Downtown community also offers unique networking opportunities. "You run into people from other businesses and offices, and it really does feel like a community. Being a member of the Downtowners Association also provides us with many resources."

The Downtowners Association has more than 200 members, with 70 percent of the membership located in Downtown and 30 percent doing business Downtown or vested in its revitalization, adds Herzog.

"This development is going to continue to foster an energy and passion for Bismarck's Downtown," Diebel continues. "We feel really lucky to have our place in Downtown. The future looks bright for this area."

Downtown Projects

The Broadway Centre has been taking shape in Downtown Bismarck over the last three years, and owner and developer Steve Pine says he and his wife, Carla, decided to develop the property after assessing the needs of Downtown Bismarck. "We literally stumbled on this site, and we did not have a design in mind until after we bought the property," he notes. "A couple of things that immediately became obvious were the need for Class A commercial space and downtown housing."

The property's Broadway Grill & Tavern is up and running, and the Centre's current tenant list includes the Crowley Fleck Law Firm, Broadway Centre Spa & Salon, Pure Skin, CC's Physical Therapy, North Dakota Petroleum Council, First Dakota Title and The Pine Companies. "Not all tenants are in their space at this time," he notes, adding there is also still commercial and retail space available.

The building's third floor includes luxury condos, and Pine says it will likely be 18 to 24 months before all commercial space and condos are completed. "The community response has been overwhelmingly favorable, and we have had a lot of positive feedback regarding the project. The restaurant has been very successful, and we continually have interest in the condos."



"Downtown Bismarck is seeing a rejuvenation with a number of new restaurants and bars opening over the past few years," he continues. "The downtown area is becoming more of an attraction for both residents and folks from out of town."

Moving Forward

Smith says there are challenges in developing Downtown, which include the railroad and parking. "The Quiet Rail will help with this obstacle and there is the possibility of a pedestrian underpass so Downtown is not so disjointed," she notes. "Also the challenge of parking has always been an issue and I think Downtown patrons are starting to embrace the idea of parking ramps."

Construction of a \$13 million parking ramp continues on the corner of Thayer Avenue and Sixth Street and it is expected to be occupied in September. "As we continue to grow, we will have to continue to find ways to address parking," Smith adds.

But even as these challenges are addressed, Downtown Bismarck will continue to draw people, businesses and developers because of its unique offerings, says Herzog. "People like Downtown Bismarck and downtowns in general because of their character and mixed-use density. Having a compact neighborhood of businesses creates walkability, and that's great for business owners and developers."

"The downtown is the heart of a community," says Smith. "If the downtown is doing well, then generally the rest of the city is doing well. Bismarck is a growing, vibrant community showcased by a vibrant and exciting Downtown."

