

Doing a City Center renaissance the right way

Our employees can enjoy the amenities of downtown.

— MATT BRAND, I&S GROUP



Reviving the core



Photos by Pat Christman

Renovated office space occupies the lower floors of the HECO building, while the upper floor are being renovated as condos.

Much of blueprint grew from Envision 20/20 process

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You won't hear the term "urban renewal" associated with the effort to revitalize downtown Mankato and North Mankato.

With the razing of historic buildings, creation of a downtown mall and its eventual failure as a retail center, the urban renewal of the 1970s and '80s carries some baggage.

Decades later, the cities are in the midst of a "City Center renaissance." This time, say supporters, it's being done right.

"People who've lived here a while talk about urban renewal," said Eric Harriman, an urban planner and coordinator of the City



Private guys aren't going to build roads or a civic center. Without that civic center and things, the other stuff wouldn't have happened.

— TONY FRENTZ, FRENTZ CONSTRUCTION

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CITY CENTER: 'Urban bulldozer' days over

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Center Partnership. "It was a big municipal push in those days — not just here but a lot of places — saying 'we need to do this.' Now you see these partnerships doing it the right way, energizing the community and the business community and seeing what people want."

Tony Filipovitch, chairman of the Urban & Regional Studies department at Minnesota State University, said 1970s renewal was too grand and failed to pay attention to preserving downtown housing and aesthetics.

"The nickname for urban renewal back then was 'urban bulldozer' — it was to provide housing and remove blight," Filipovitch said.

In Mankato, a great deal of student housing was razed. While the housing was largely dilapidated, Filipovitch said it also removed a large number of students who lived and shopped close to downtown.

And, he said, commercial buildings were bulldozed or altered with an eye solely on commerce and not on aesthetics.

The difference today is a clearer, long-range vision developed by a cross-section of residents and a public-private approach.

"There will be a continuous improvement on the plan. I think in our previous efforts that's what was missing," said Mankato City Manager Pat Hentges.

"In the '70s urban redevelopment and the mall, when the newness wore off, we didn't keep making the improvements."

A vision

Much of the blueprint for the cities' core grew from the Envision 20/20 process several years ago, which brought together residents, businesses, academics and government leaders who developed various general goals for the city.

While the city moved ahead with public projects, including consolidating city offices in Mankato Place, operating the civic center and investing in roads, the private sector created the City Center Partnership, a subsidiary of Greater Mankato Growth.

"There was a need for an organization to coordinate everything," Harriman said.

"We're here to help that synergy of a vibrant core area. The aesthetics, marketing, business retention."

The group so far has 60 invested partners who pay an annual membership. The group is doing focus groups to identify goals in the five geographic areas in the City Center, which stretches from Madison Avenue to near West High School and the Sibley Parkway and along Belgrade Avenue in North Mankato.

"Some area may need better pedestrian traffic and another area might need something else," Harriman said of the reason for the focus groups.

Public-private partnership

"It's quite important that you have both private and public involved," said Tony Frenz, whose construction firm has played a big role in downtown Mankato. He renovated the Graif building and the Emy Frenz Arts Center, and is finishing up on the HECO building.

"Private guys aren't going to build



Pat Christman

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roads or a civic center. Without that civic center and things, the other stuff wouldn't have happened."

He cited the Hilton Garden Inn built by Curt Fisher, Paulsen Architects locating downtown, and Mike Brennan's renovation of the Landkamer building as some of the earlier projects brought downtown by public investment.

"The Landkamer was one of the first total renovations. We saw that it worked and there was a lot of other stuff going on that showed us it can work."

"The city spurred all of that."

Hentges said changes in downtown streets was one key, specifically the Second Street extension over the Veterans Memorial Bridge, as well as new medians, lighting and converting one-ways to two-ways.

"Those were major investments to the downtown and that's what we concentrated on," Hentges said.

He said the infrastructure work helped bring the major private construction projects, including MinnStar Bank, as well as a number of storefront rehabilitations that bring private sector investments.

"They brought more stable rent, employers and employees to the civic center marketplace."

The city is now analyzing traffic on Cherry and Warren streets for possible conversion to two-way streets.

And the city is beginning renovations of the Law Enforcement Center, which Hentges believes will help spur more private development in that area.

An urban experience

Many of the businesses that have located to the City Center say it is providing the ambiance that employees and visitors like.

"Our employees can enjoy the amenities of downtown. They can step out to get a bite to eat and do things they couldn't in our former location," said Matt Brand, an engineer at I&S Group. The firm recently relocated its offices to the HECO building. "There's an excitement down here."

While I&S looked at building a



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new office in a business park. Brand said they knew they belonged downtown. And they were able to work with a clean slate, having their architects design their two floors of office space.

"One of our architects said it's like having a living museum where our clients can see the work we do. We even left part of the ceiling open so people can see the HVAC and electrical work."

The firm's move coincides with an expansion of I&S Group's business. While beginning as a firm that served southern Minnesota, I&S now is licensed in 24 states and actively working in a dozen. Their clients include Menards, Kohl's and Abra Auto Body.

Belgrade boost

While the bulk of investments has been in downtown Mankato, Belgrade Avenue in North Mankato also has seen steady development.

The long vacant Marigold site near the Veterans Bridge has a new office and residential building constructed by businessman Van Moody. He is moving ahead with a second phase of construction on the property.

Brunton Architects is building a new office on a small lot between existing buildings across the street. Brunton also will start work later this summer on a major renovation of the former Dollar Store a couple of blocks down Belgrade, converting it to commercial on the first floor and apartments on a new second floor.

A corner building that formerly housed a laundry is being completely renovated.

The city, through its Port Authority, has provided financial assistance for the projects through grants or low-interest loans. The city also has added parking spaces and other street work in the area.