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What's Next?

by **TED S. MCGREGOR JR.**

If you read William Youngs' excellent history of Expo '74, The Fair and the Falls, you understand how desperately Spokane's leading citizens wanted to save downtown back in the 1960s and '70s. What an effort it was — relocating railyards to a single track, cleaning up the industrial uses near the city's new centerpiece and convincing state and federal governments to help pay for some of it under the guise of a World's Fair.

It was a stunning success, yet within 20 years, downtown was in decline. So back in the mid-'90s, city leaders jumped into action, initially by thinking about what Spokane should be. The result was the Spokane Downtown Plan, formally adopted in 1999. I was on the steering committee for that first plan, and I was just asked to join up again to help update the plan in hopes of avoiding another letdown like they had after Expo. And on Nov. 29, the Downtown Spokane Partnership held a public meeting at WSU Spokane to launch the sequel.

Whether it can be credited to the plan or not, the past decade has marked a major turnaround in the direction of downtown. The DSP's consultant, Daniel Iacofano of the urban planning firm MIG, ran through the list of accomplishments, both public and private, and it's impressive: the Steam Plant, River Park Square, the Davenport Hotel, the new Convention Center, the Bing, the Fox, new condos, new retail — a whole new attitude, in fact.

Of course the past 10 years haven't been without their controversies (neither was the Expo era), but it's hard not to

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conclude that downtown Spokane was, somehow, saved. Still, a lot of the problems we discussed a decade ago still fester — getting rid of all the surface-level parking lots (not adding to them, as we have been doing), thinking about switching some of our idiotic one-way streets to two-way (as we did with Post Street) and, perhaps most elusive of all, creating a sense of place (which is hard with our freeway-dominated entrances).

So in the spirit of downtown's ongoing revolution, here's what I think should come next:

Define our local culture and embrace it. In Seattle, it's coffee and books. In Boston, it's history. And if you visit those downtowns, these cultural touchstones are represented. In Spokane, how about a Native American cultural center to reinforce our rich tribal heritage? Here in the home of Hoopfest and Bloomsday (and skiing, and kayaking, etc), maybe we should embrace the theme of amateur athletics, as cast in the Bloomsday runners? Then there's our place in a region rich in natural resources, from wheat to silver to timber; a new public market, filled with local bounty, would tell people who we are. Finally, and most obviously, there's the Spokane River, and the Gorge Park is a great idea we should all get behind.

Get more touristy. This one is going to rub some people the wrong way, but the downtowns I think are successful have a feel that pairs the touristy with the genuine, like Quincy Market in Boston or the waterfront in Seattle. Think about it this way: What will visitors remember about their visit to Spokane? I would say the Carousel, the Red Wagon, the Davenport, the Falls — things they cannot see everywhere else they visit. I'd also like to see a revival of the idea from the last plan to create a public square somewhere across from the park — a place for musicians, street performers, outdoor convention seminars, hot dog stands and where you can grab a pedicab ride to the MAC or the Arena. And inside Riverfront Park, we need to consider some better vendors. The experience of sipping a latte while gazing over the water is unmatched, but we take such a sacred view of the park that we miss its opportunities. We can preserve the open space while putting it to better use.

Get more people to move downtown. I'm not a big fan of grandiose, silver-bullet solutions, but we may need one here. So far the pace of adding housing units has been plodding. Kudos to all those who have taken risks to bring housing downtown, but we need many more units and at all price points. Perhaps what we need are new-construction projects, like in Seattle's Belltown, with a target of 200 or 300 condo and apartment units. That'll be tougher than ever to do, with credit tightening nationwide, but I think downtown housing needs a big shot in the arm to get jump-started. Kendall Yards has a huge part to play in this effort.

Don't forget the small, local businesses. What makes a downtown unique is not Williams-Sonoma — which I love. No, it's the odd mix of shops and restaurants with the kind of flair you only get from local ownership. We need to be careful that our downtown makes room for such businesses, and perhaps even encourages them. Maybe the DSP and Greater Spokane Inc. could organize or



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ramp up their mentor programs for small, fledgling businesses. Perhaps we could find a place to incubate such businesses — the way Sirti does for high-tech startups. One potential site is the massive Jensen-Byrd building on the WSU Spokane campus. There's also the YMCA in Riverfront Park, which we are apparently purchasing. Let's look into those opportunities, because our downtown's success and our local economy's health are dependent on fostering a strong entrepreneurial class.

Put together some money for all these ideas. Many successful downtowns have some kind of loan fund or other mechanism to lend a hand to certain projects. In Louisville, for example, a local loan fund helped prime their downtown housing pump. It would have been nice to have had some money to lend to developers who wanted to save the Rookery Block. Instead, we now have yet another surface-level parking lot right in the city center. Yes, there's still work to be done.

**Send your ideas about downtown Spokane
totheeditor@inlander.com and we'll publish them in the
coming weeks.**

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