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A new direction for Battle Creek's downtown

Plan could mean a bright future for city

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For the Enquirer*

With empty storefronts and abandoned buildings punctuating Michigan Avenue, downtown may not look like it has a promising future, but behind the scenes, city and economic officials are laying the groundwork for some major changes.

Battle Creek is a city on the verge of emerging, they say. And the change has already begun.

In November, the city's economic development group, Battle Creek Unlimited, unveiled an ambitious \$85 million plan that it said would transform the face of downtown Battle Creek – restructuring the city, bringing more jobs, diversifying our economy and creating a bigger, better, brighter Battle Creek.

It's a plan that came at the right time, said BCU officials. Battle Creek, like the state of Michigan, is in flux. As a city based heavily on automotive and transportation manufacturing, employers have been cutting back and laying off employees, with no tangible happy ending in sight.

It's time for a proactive plan, said BCU's senior adviser Jim Hettinger, the organization's former president and chief executive officer. Much like Hettinger blazed a path in the 1970s with the creation of the successful Fort Custer Industrial Park, he said BCU is ready to take Battle Creek in a new direction, one that promises growth and new beginnings for the city.

Six months into the plan, Hettinger and new BCU president and CEO Karl Dehn said they are pleased with the progress they've made -- and, despite some setbacks, are optimistic that the plan will succeed, and quite possibly exceed their expectations.

"I think that (the plan) has wheels," Hettinger said. "I hate to sound like 'Old Man Time' but every time you start a project, you run a gauntlet and this one has gotten a long way down the gauntlet and still has momentum. I've seen a lot of projects fall off, but I don't think this one will."

Hettinger isn't the only one who has confidence. Kellogg has plans for a \$22.5 million investment for the expansion of its downtown campus, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation has pledged \$35 million to fund a large portion of the remaining \$62.5 million. The remaining funding will come from various public and private sources, including grants from federal, state and city sources, as well as private investors.

So what does the plan promise? Hettinger and Dehn said it will target not only business growth, but growth in the community and education. Those plans include:

- A collaboration with area educators to enhance curriculum focused on food testing, food research and food science in an effort to prepare area youth for such careers.
- A possible consolidation between Battle Creek Family YMCA and Battle Creek Parks and Recreation, with the potential of moving much of both operations to the current Full Blast site in

downtown Battle Creek.

- \$2 million in work to improve the look and safety of downtown, including making a more attractive "gateway" to Battle Creek, by adding signage, lighted elements and art to the Sojourner Truth Memorial Parkway off of M-66.
- Creating a "walkable urbanity" by increasing green spaces and improving the cleanliness and safety of the entire downtown area.
- Increasing downtown's educational presence, with a possible relocation of the Battle Creek area Math and Science Center from Springfield to a site downtown.
- An expansion of Kellogg's downtown campus. In November, the company planned to construct a \$22.5 million six-story office building, to be built next to the McCamly Plaza and Hotel. In February, the company put the tower's construction on hold for at least a year, now estimating construction to begin in spring of 2010.
- And what BCU officials say has become the biggest part of the plan: making Battle Creek a national leader in food safety science technology, recruiting major food technology companies to re-locate to Battle Creek

The project aims to develop what BCU officials have coined "The National Center for Food Protection," a facility that would encompass all areas of food safety, including food testing, food chain defense systems and the development and commercialization of food technology systems.

And things have been moving along swiftly. In March, BCU received a \$2 million W.K. Kellogg Foundation grant to develop an international food training institute downtown with the Association of Food and Drug Officials (AFDO). The institute will serve as a training facility for food inspectors and classes will be held at the McCamly Plaza Hotel and Western Michigan University's Kendall Center.

"This really thrusts Battle Creek, and the state, forward as a future leader for food safety and protection," said BCU's Karl Dehn. "Not only will it be good for the local economy, but food protection is a much needed and rapidly growing industry."

Hettinger said it's the rapid need for increased food safety and food protection technology that will drive the project forward quickly. Recent events, such as January's massive peanut butter recall, which left hundreds severely ill and several dead, clearly show the need for the development of better training and technology. And Battle Creek is a great place to do it.

"The inspector at the (Georgia-based Peanut Corp. of America) plant graduated with a degree in history. So that should tell you something about what the industry is dealing with," Hettinger said. "Developing the right technology can go a long way to make sure people would not die or get sick from their food. And the threat of terrorists purposely tainting the food supply is greatly reduced. And I believe that here in Battle Creek, we have all the right ingredients to be a national center for developing this technology."

Hettinger said that in addition to being home to major food companies, Battle Creek has a strong military, aviation technology and manufacturing base - all which can utilize their skills in the food safety arena. BCU has already worked with area aviation technology firm, Michigan Aerospace, to take a device that detects anthrax and use it to detect anomalies in food. It was tested on a can of tainted dog food and was a success.

"We have many major manufacturers and the more the auto industry goes away, the more these companies will be driven to use their strengths in other areas," Hettinger said.

George Erickcek, a senior regional analyst for the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research,

said BCU's food safety plan is a winner, and the timing is right.

"Battle Creek is really building on its strengths and that's why I think the plan will succeed," Erickcek said. "A lot of time we see communities want to jump on the 'new hot industry' like alternative energy, but they just don't have the right resources to do it, so they fail. Battle Creek has all the right resources."

While the food safety science portion of the plan is moving along smoothly, there has been one roadblock in the downtown redevelopment. In February, Kellogg, citing a tough economic climate, announced a year delay in building the \$22.5 million six-story tower.

The plan included the relocation of approximately 680 employees who currently work in the company's Porter Street office complex to the new building, across from Kellogg's world headquarters, located downtown at One Kellogg Square.

"We made the difficult, but necessary, decision to delay our downtown Battle Creek office tower construction project because of our need to manage costs in a challenging economy," Mackay said.

Mackay said Kellogg will review the project later this year and make a decision on how to proceed.

However, Kellogg is moving ahead full speed with the \$54 million expansion of its downtown research and development facility, the W.K. Kellogg Institute for Food and Nutrition Research, with a 157,000-square-foot addition to be completed this fall.

"We also continue to support the Battle Creek downtown revitalization efforts," said Kellogg CEO David Mackay. "And we remain committed to an on-time completion of our expanded global research facility and will continue support for the other promising elements of the downtown revitalization plan."

Although Kellogg's expansion was a big factor in getting the downtown revitalization rolling, Dehn said the two are not mutually exclusive. The plan, he said, is strengthened greatly by Kellogg, but can certainly stand on its own.

"The plan requires we improve the infrastructure and complete the visual enhancements and the whole downtown experience. If we are going to have a globally competitive workforce, then we need to do this," Dehn said. "Can this happen without a Kellogg office expansion? Can we really pursue and really capitalize on it without a new Kellogg building? Yes we can. And should we? Yes we should."

Kathleen Mechem, president and CEO of the Battle Creek Area Chamber of Commerce, said the plan has a tremendous potential to transform downtown and believes it will succeed because it has years of strategy and research behind it.

"It is all exciting," Mechem said. "Companies and other institutions are planning and making tremendous investments in business and physical infrastructure that represent a commitment to our community and to our future. There is a lot of potential in the plan for continuing to diversify our economy."

And Dehn said the plan "sets a direction" for our city, one that will affect innovation, education, culture, youth programming and future industry. Dehn said though it is ambitious, it is a risk worth taking.

"There is a risk, that it may not work out. But people could have said that about Fort Custer in 1972. I think we have a good strategy to improve the economy," Dehn said "It's not a 'build it and they will come' approach, it's based on capitalizing on the competencies we have in our community."

"There is risk," he said, "But what's the risk if we don't do anything and see continued decline in our downtown?"