

Eric J. Greene: Downtown changes create hope

Eric J. Greene • *The Enquirer* • November 14, 2010

I consider myself a guy with reasonable expectations.

I don't fret about the weather like a lot of folks do; if it rains or snows, it's no big deal to me.

I prefer a reliable, functional vehicle, but I don't need a sporty car to get me from A to B.

I know products break, meals are sometimes prepared incorrectly and receipts are occasionally wrong, but I've never demanded to speak to a manager nor raised my voice at a waiter, cashier or customer service person on the telephone.

So all the talk and activity about the transformation of downtown Battle Creek for the past couple years hasn't meant a lot to me, even though I work downtown and spend money in the restaurants there.

Downtown is exceptionally safe and clean -- and, thus, has met my expectations for the decade I've spent in Battle Creek -- so I never felt a strong need for something new in Battle Creek's core business district. Interested more in economic strategy and business retention, the chatter about new lighting, new signs, special brick work and outdoor furniture didn't pique much interest for me.

That is, until recently. Something finally clicked. Watching some of the improvements take shape downtown, and feeling a sense that the recently added jobs and housing are here to stay, has me excited about the future of downtown Battle Creek.

I suppose my expectations started to rise after construction began at the Horse Park on Michigan Avenue. The space was, in my opinion, just fine beforehand. I even liked the weird horse statue.

But when that space between the former Fifth Third building and the former Shrank's restaurant was opened up a few weeks ago, it revealed a view of the stout Kellogg Co. headquarters and a sense of openness that wasn't there before. I realized a downtown doesn't have to be a tunnel whose walls are comprised by tall buildings. It can be a

patchwork of businesses and destinations, some towering above and others at ground level with walk-right-in accessibility. It can be a place with purpose.

In short, a minor physical change sparked a change in my perception of downtown, leading me to imagine how attitudes, especially those of patrons and employers, may change once major improvements have taken place.

So it wasn't until I started to see what could be made of ordinary spaces that I understood that "good enough" need not be the standard for downtown Battle Creek. Just because something is already acceptable doesn't mean it can't, or shouldn't, be great.

The point was driven home for me Wednesday night when I, along with 150 other locals, attended a two-hour forum at Burnham Brook devoted to the current vision for downtown.

"As your downtown looks, so will your community appear," said Jim Hettinger, retired economic guru who still has his hands in downtown revitalization.

"People make judgments about what they see in downtowns," said Hettinger, lamenting the blight of certain buildings and the perception, even in our own city, that our downtown is unsavory.

Indeed, a city's downtown is the anchor which fosters the central sense of place for the network of residential, industrial, commercial and even natural corridors that surround it.

As a tourist, I've been in hundreds of cities in America, but I don't feel as if I've truly gotten a sense of any given city unless I've seen its downtown. If I visit only the outskirts, I feel I've not experienced the local culture, the local personality. And to me, that's what a downtown provides.

If a downtown feels lifeless, even though it may be clean and safe, that's the impression that may be left upon all who tread there.

In Battle Creek, various efforts have come and gone in the downtown. We had a pedestrian mall, and then we didn't. We had the super block, and then we didn't. We've had facade improvement grants, tax breaks, festivals, outdoor dining permits and an endless chorus of voices calling for a return to the old days when department stores, theaters and eateries were aplenty.

So I understand the people who are pessimistic about this latest effort -- yet another in a long line -- to transform downtown.

However, this one feels different. This one feels more realistic because it's grounded not on a gimmicky refitting of an existing structure, but on an economically motivated strategy that combines business needs with educational services and consumer desires.

The focus on the food industry, which is growing in size and importance around the world, might just be the key as Kellogg, Covance Inc., the International Food Protection Training Institute and suppliers expand into previously unoccupied spaces and hire workers for jobs that didn't exist until recently.

A co-dependent relationship with Battle Creek Public Schools, which is refining its curriculum with a heavy emphasis on critical, scientific thinking, helps solidify a pipeline for local children to become local professionals.

With the ground work falling into place, greatness and a reputation reset are on downtown Battle Creek's horizon.

At the very least, there's ample reason for those of us who believe in downtown to not throw in the towel.

Eric J. Greene can be reached at 966-0687 or egreene@gannett.com.