



Revitalization enters final year amid hopes, challenges

A positive outlook prevails as the third year of Battle Creek's downtown-revitalization project ends, even as city leaders gain a stronger sense of the challenges likely to linger through 2012 -- and beyond.

"Given that this is one of the worst economies that I have ever seen, I could consider the progress we've made to be extremely successful," said Jim Hettinger, senior adviser to Battle Creek Unlimited, which has spearheaded the transformation effort.

"This was the first year we could really show some physical progress," said City Manager Ken Tsuchiyama. "With the streetscape project, it really was something that -- visually -- people could see what was happening."

As evidence of additional progress behind the scenes, Hettinger pointed to the fact that, since November 2008, 942 additional people have located downtown through new jobs or relocations -- 810 through relocated jobs and 132 through new jobs. Those figures represent \$60 million in personal income, according to figures provided by Karl Dehn, president and CEO of BCU, during a community forum in

November.

In the same period, 415,000 square feet of existing and newly constructed building space has been occupied downtown, according to BCU.

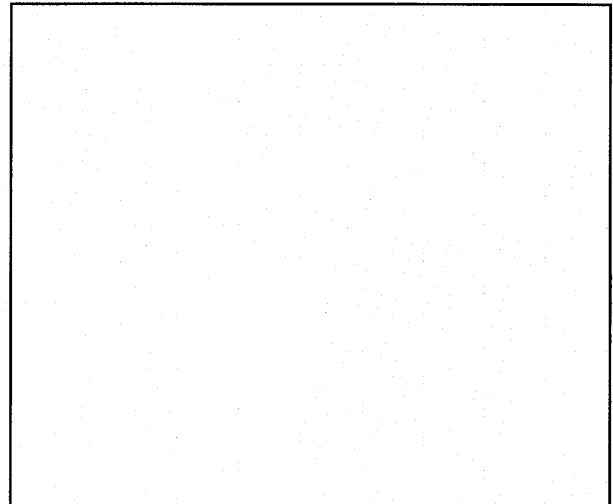
"I don't think that's been well understood or well appreciated," Hettinger said. "Overall, I'm very optimistic. I'm very happy with the progress that's been made."

Tsuchiyama agreed.

"The other aspects of the transportation -- bringing jobs downtown with Kellogg's relocation of their employees and efforts BCU has made to fill much of that vacant space -- that was already started but that took a greater step over the last year," he said. "I think we're really pleased with the progress that we're seeing."

"Overall, we've been very pleased with the progress with the transformation project," Dehn said. "Naturally, we would like to see even more investment and even more new

Advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



businesses." He pointed to the fact that "we now have more than 900 people downtown than when we started" as well as new investment by 16 new businesses and 10 existing businesses as further indication of the plan's success.

"Hundreds of people can share in the credit for what we're seeing," Dehn said.

The four-year initiative was launched in November 2008 and includes development of the business district as a food-safety hub through the Global Food Protection Institute, expansion efforts by Kellogg Co. and Covance Inc., the eventual relocation of the Battle Creek Math and Science Center, renovation of local schools and development of downtown residential units, retail outlets and other educational opportunities.

The \$88 million for the overall project comes from private donations and includes money from Kellogg Co., Hinman Co., Covance Inc. and McCamly Place Hotel.

"Overall, it's gone beyond our expectations," Hettinger said. "I didn't think we'd do that well with private-sector investment."

During the forum in November, sponsored by Project 20/20, about 100 people who attended were asked what attitudes Battle Creek needs to embrace to reshape itself.

The top broad themes that they identified -- and which were posted at www.BCProject2020.com -- are:

» Help leadership develop standards/ways to promote Battle Creek.

» Use new, innovative ideas and technology to promote Battle Creek.

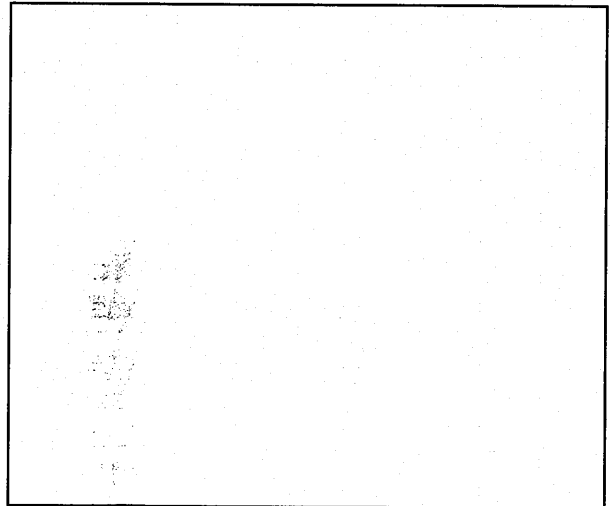
» Help everyone to "tell the story of Battle Creek."

Specific to the business district, many people expressed the belief that downtown would benefit from having more entertainment venues such as theater, arts, culture and restaurants. The same views have been expressed at community forums in past years.

Literally paving the way for such possibilities is the city's new downtown streetscape, whose second phase largely wrapped up as 2011 ended.

Michigan Avenue has re-opened to pedestrian and motor traffic and the detours that ruled downtown from April through November last year aren't expected to return until early spring, when

Advertisement



Print Powered By FormatDynamics™



work on the segment of Michigan Avenue between Division Street and Michigan's intersection with Capital Avenue is to be finished.

"By the end of 2012, all of streetscape improvements and amenities will be in place along Michigan Avenue," said Cheryl Beard, BCU's director of commercial development, in an e-mailed response. Also to be completed are new bridge lighting and artwork by young people on the newly erected arches along M-66.

"We hope to announce a festival gathering location next year. In addition, we continue to work with various parties seeking retail and office space. We also have a couple of individuals who are interested in acquiring one of our vacant buildings through the 'Build your Momentum off our Momentum' campaign."

The overall project's goal has been to make downtown more inviting to commerce by establishing a water-themed design along Michigan Avenue and its side streets. In time, new pavement, lights, benches and other amenities will highlight the two rivers that flow through downtown.

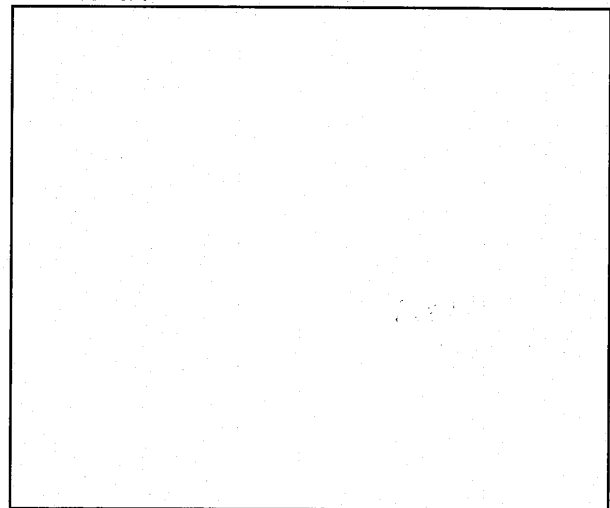
The plan has won praise from downtown business owners who anticipate an improved retail climate after the work is completed, but the work hasn't gone without complaint. Some owners said commerce was curtailed downtown because access to doors fronting Michigan Avenue became difficult to access, or because parking became too limited.

"As with most construction projects, there typically are issues that rise especially when you are moving earth," Beard said in her message. "The Michigan Avenue streetscape project took longer than anticipated due to some unknowns. We recognize these unknowns spilled into some of the businesses, causing them challenges. The finished project is well worth the summer pains we experienced earlier this year. People have been very complimentary to the end result."

Beard said BCU would "continue to communicate with all interested parties to minimize disruption" during work in the coming year.

"The Downtown Partnership did an excellent job this construction year, sending weekly communications (if not more frequent on some occasions) regarding the construction and areas that may be impacted," Beard said in her message. "We will meet with business and properties owners located on East Michigan Avenue between Capital and Division in

Advertisement



Print Powered By FormatDynamics™



early 2012 to inform them about the project, hear their concerns and work to resolve any issues that may arise."

BCU also will continue to focus on reducing blight, attracting private investment and encouraging additional educational opportunities in the area, Beard said.

John C. Sherwood can be reached at 966-0684 or jsherwood@battlecreekenquirer.com.

Want more information?

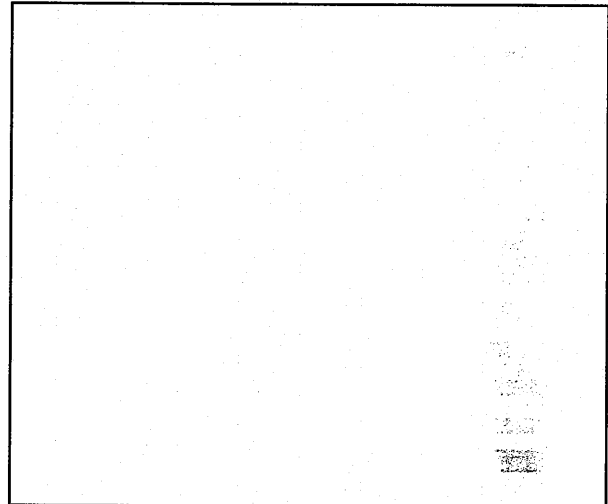
Additional information about streetscape construction, including maps, may be seen online at downtownbattlecreek.com, on its Facebook page and on Twitter at @DowntownBTLCRK or #reroutebc.

Information about the overall downtown transformation project is available at

Related Links

Blighted properties are downside to downtown rehab

Advertisement



Print Powered By FormatDynamics™