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## The growth of downtown Mesa: Where the track is leading

Dec 7th, 2015 · by Charles Clark, Special to the Mesa Independent · 0 Comments



The light rail approaches the Central Main stop. (Photo special to the Independent by Charles Clark)

Imagine a vibrant downtown, where people at any stage of life can find enjoyment. Children walk the sidewalk following the painted footprints of dinosaurs to the Arizona Museum of Natural History. Families enjoy dinner at one of the local restaurants. Shoppers hone their antiquing skills in one of the nearby businesses, or enjoy art at one of the local studios. People flock to the arts center to catch a National Geographic presentation.

Single-family homes, mid-intensity apartments, and townhouses are scattered throughout this small urban hub. It is a point of pride. A destination for both local residents and residents of the valley as a whole. It is a place where the adage "live, work, play" is a reality, and at the heart of it all, runs a train. That is what Mesa city officials envision for what is an evolving downtown.

Downtown Mesa is already rather unique. It has historic buildings, museums and an arts center. It is even developing a slight college atmosphere with the emergence of Benedictine University, Wilkes University and Mesa Community College's downtown center. With the opening of the Metro Light Rail expansion this past August, the downtown district is only expected to grow.

However, what is perhaps most unique about downtown Mesa lies in the potential it possesses. It can truly become a downtown unlike anything else the valley has to offer. And while the light-rail expansion represents a great first step, it is only one step in the process of transforming Mesa into something that is a one-of-a-kind destination.

Since the beginning of 2012, Mesa has been steadily working toward a plan city officials laid out in the Central Main Street Area Plan. According to the city's website, the goal of the plan is to create a more active and viable downtown area in Mesa, and the plan lays out the policies needed to facilitate development patterns directed toward that endeavor.

This really takes off with the opening of the light-rail expansion this past August, although the development of the

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### Historic sign to remain

Sankist Growers fruit-packing plant to be auto parts manufacturing facility

By Richard H. Dyer

A historic building that makes high-performance auto parts is remodeling the former Mesa Sankist Growers fruit-packing plant at 2740 Central Express Road in Mesa. The building is being converted into an auto parts manufacturing facility.

The building is being converted into an auto parts manufacturing facility. The building is being converted into an auto parts manufacturing facility.

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infrastructure to support the vision for downtown began well before that.

The growth and development of downtown begins with the light rail. The thought has been that it will bolster the economy and development, and this thinking was based essentially on the history of what has occurred in downtown Phoenix and Tempe.

"You see what has happened in those cities because of the light rail," **Mesa City Manager Christopher Brady** said. "We've mapped out where most of the new developments, and the high-rise developments have taken place, and the thinking is that will continue."

"It's not just the experience of Phoenix and Tempe though," Mr. Brady said. "It is something that most light-rail cities have experienced over time."

This creation of new residential areas, along with simply bringing more foot traffic downtown, should in turn boost the economy of the downtown area.

"The hope is that now that the light rail is open it will make these businesses even more accessible by bringing customer traffic into the downtown area," said David Short, the executive director of the **Downtown Mesa Association**, a private nonprofit organization dedicated to the beneficial economic growth and business and residential development of downtown Mesa.

Not only does the light rail bring in more customers, but it also brings in greater interest from businesses interested in making their home downtown.

"It has brought a lot more interest into downtown because with the light rail being a fixed asset that we have, they [business owners] know it's not going to move or go away," Mr. Short said. "It has interested some investors, properties, businesses that want to be on the light-rail line."

However, there is a lot more that comes into play than simply opening the light rail and having things take off. Fulfilling the vision for what downtown Mesa is to become, and creating a downtown that is a sustainable success, is more complicated than that.

"Mesa has been working on growing its downtown for a while, and it's got a nice downtown, a historic downtown. It's not something new, it is just changing with the advent of the light rail," Mr. Brady said. "It becomes a more modern urban lifestyle. With the urban downtown it becomes a neighborhood in and of itself, you have more residential, you have restaurants, you have entertainment and those all become part of the experience of downtown."

"It's about creating the right sustainable mix. We look at employment, entertainment, residential, all of those components working together," said Kelley Keffer, management assistant in Mesa's **Economic Development Office**. "It's about creating that vibrancy, that level of activity that makes the downtown a center, electric lets say. Where people want to come and there are things to do that attract them here. It's commercial development, as well as residential development."

Essentially, it is about not putting all of the eggs into one basket and using the different components of the downtown area to make something that is a destination and a unique experience.

"We want downtown Mesa to become a destination, we'd love to draw people in from other areas," Mr. Short said. "We don't want to create another downtown Tempe or downtown Gilbert, we want it to be unique to downtown Mesa."

"I mean obviously we want the vibrancy that some of those other downtowns have, but I think it is going to grow at its own pace and keep with what the residents and the community finds works in Mesa," he said.

To meet the vision of creating a downtown that uses all of its components collaboratively and is sustainable though, it first requires increased development in the area, particularly residential development.

"Right now our downtown is individually very successful; the arts center gets 460,000 people, the i.d.e.a. Museum is going to set a record this year for attendance. The temple down at the other end of downtown gets like two million people, the spring training stadiums get record attendance. All of those things are successful, but all individually," said Jeff McVay, manager of downtown transformation. "Once we have the people living down here to make the activation happen in-between them, that's when it is just going to sustain itself."

This also means that the sheer number of available housing needs to increase.

"We need a significant amount of more market-rate housing," Mr. McVay said. "Our planning documents actually have a specific policy statement saying we need 2,000 new residential units in our downtown."

The ideal is also to have a wide variety of mixed-residential housing.

"Not only do you have a different type of residential where you can have a single-family neighborhood, but you also have a medium-intensity apartment development, or townhouses," Mr. McVay said. "Essentially, you can have the spectrum of your entire life. Maybe you move a couple of times but you can have the type of residential that you want. And also that variety means that we have architectural variety. It is not cookie-cutter."

The ability to not be cookie-cutter is an advantage that Mesa possesses that very few others have because of the city's ability to mix the historic and modern residential, as well as the commercial.

"We have incredible opportunities, there are large retail parcels, but there are also opportunities to refresh some of the older housing products along that stretch," said Shea Joachim, senior project manager in Mesa's Economic Development Office.

The city has begun to make headway in residential development. Mr. McVay said that the city has put out two requests for proposals. The first closed several months ago and Mr. McVay said the city had received good proposals for a development project off of Central and Main. He is also confident that with the proposal working with the development team the project will be a success.

The second RFP was released about a month ago and is for a much larger site.

These two projects could be a significant step in increasing, as well as expediting, development in downtown Mesa because it will allow developers to prove a market.

"Our downtown suffers from a lack of supply. So right now because our downtown is lacking in the number of urban residential types, it is difficult for a developer to prove a market," Mr. McVay said. "Every developer I talk to, they know that if they build it they will be able to rent it out, no problem. But the problem is that in the financing world you have to have a market demand or something that proves this, otherwise you're facing an uphill battle in financing."

"So we're just waiting for one of those first market-rate developments to come up out of the ground, and one of these two RFPs will be that. Once that happens and we're able to prove the demand, it is going to go crazy here," he said.

The light rail was the spark and it seems that development is going to pick up the torch. However, what remains unanswered is what does this mean for Mesa's identity?

As Mr. Short mentioned, it's not about creating another Gilbert or Tempe, it is about creating something that fits with and in Mesa. City officials, such as Ms. Keffer agree.

"It's about finding the right operator, with the right concept that fits our downtown," she said.

City officials also speak to the unique aspects and players contributing to an overarching identity of downtown Mesa as a whole.

"Everything that we develop should have some kind of identity to it, and that unique identity contributes to the overall identity of our downtown," said Mr. McVay.

And for those concerned that this urbanization may alter the identity of Mesa as a whole, City Manager Brady has an answer.

"Mesa is one of the top 40 cities in the country. If you want to be in that small-town suburban environment there's plenty of that experience still left in Mesa," Mr. Brady said. "But for the downtown it wants to be a more urban metropolitan experience. I don't think we're worried that having that in our downtown will change the character of Mesa. It doesn't change what people have known."

*Editor's note: Charles Clark is a journalism student at the Arizona State University Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and wrote the article as a class assignment.*

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