

Downtown development

If you renovate it, they will come

Developer says residences are a key component to revitalizing retail spaces

- By Joel Mills
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Revitalizing Lewiston's historic downtown is a puzzle that has largely vexed those trying to solve it for generations.

But increasing demand for residential units is pushing investors off the proverbial fence, and redevelopment projects are starting to pile up. Many believe that more people living downtown will feed the success of existing businesses and help fill the vacant storefronts that have made parts of Main Street look more like a ghost town than a thriving retail district.

"I feel strongly that we're seeing that predictable paradigm shift," said Ray Skelton, whose JMS Family Limited Partnership owns several adjoining buildings on the south side of the 800 block of Main Street. "A lot of the younger generation, the millennials, or any of the demographics, like more of the walking communities where they have recreational opportunities next to them, or they have evening opportunities."

The spacious upper floors of those buildings are currently unused. But Skelton said the partnership is studying the market and drawing up conceptual plans for a possible redevelopment project that could include multiple apartments.

A new master plan for downtown Lewiston emphasized the importance of bringing more residential life to the neighborhood. The plan got rousing support from both the public and property owners when it came to the Lewiston City Council last month. At a public

hearing before the vote, current downtown resident Steve Martin recalled the atmosphere half a century ago when Main Street was a bustling center of activity at all hours of the day, and said the master plan was a big step toward restoring that vitality.

Councilors passed the plan with a unanimous vote. Developer Mark Alexander of New York has been on the forefront of downtown redevelopment for years, first completing the Towne Square project at Fifth and Main before moving on to other projects, including the former Myklebust's building at Brackenbury Square.

Both projects include nicely appointed apartments on their upper floors in addition to their ground-floor commercial space. Alexander said he has always believed having people live in his buildings will be a key to their long-term success.

He also pointed to the completion of the Lewiston City Library on D Street and the 2016 certification of the region as an American Viticulture Area as factors pushing downtown momentum. And he said the approval of the master plan — coupled with the bond voters passed in 2017 to build a new high school — reenergized his commitment to making further investments in the other properties he owns along Main Street.

“Frankly, I was questioning the sincerity of the city council and the community,” Alexander said. “If a community is not willing to invest in itself, why should I?”

More residents, more customers

Beautiful Downtown Lewiston Executive Director Courtney Kramer said demand for residential opportunities around Main Street is nothing new, and property owners and managers have had no trouble filling the existing units since the early 2000s. For example, some of the units above the Blue Lantern Coffee House and Main Street Lighting have had the same tenants for more than a decade.

That inventory of rental units had been stagnant until recently. But even those newer units rented easily, some before they were completed. Kramer spearheaded the

creation of the master plan, and said its emphasis on expanding residential opportunities will help attract more developers to the area.

“Our job right now is to recruit investors, show them the vision and assist them with the financing tools that can help them take on a development that is a little bit new for the community,” Kramer said. “Knowing that so many of those (residential) units were occupied so quickly helps underscore that and helps us with investor recruitment.”

One big fish that Kramer helped land is the ownership of the Tapped Taphouse and Kitchen in Moscow. She first approached them several years ago about opening a branch in Lewiston, and they were set to close Friday on the building that comprises 520, 524 and 528 Main St.

Co-owner Tyler Antkowiak said the business is working on the financing to redevelop the property, with a Tapped going into 524 and a coffee shop or retail space going into 528. The second floor currently has 12 tiny studio apartments that share common bathrooms, but Antkowiak said they will be remodeled into six studios and two one-bedroom apartments, all with their own kitchens and bathrooms.

“One of the best things you can do to ensure good clientele when you bring amenities downtown is to bring more residents downtown,” he said, noting that Tapped in Moscow is surrounded by the densest residential section of town. “We’ve benefitted immensely from that. So if we’re able to bring residents in simultaneously as we bring in more amenities, that just sounds like more customers to me.”

More projects on the horizon

Alexander isn’t done developing new residential properties along Main Street. He bought the building at 610 Main St. that used to house Courtesy Rent to Own several years ago and gutted it. The build-out was put on hold while designs were finalized, and Alexander focused his energies on redeveloping the Southgate Plaza on Bryden Avenue.

But now Alexander is ready to pull the trigger. He will put the project out to bid this fall, begin construction next year and open about six months later. The ground floor will have 20 small retail spaces with a central breezeway connecting Main and F streets, while the mezzanine will have five apartments.

Farther east in an area that Kramer has taken to calling “mid-Main,” Alexander also has plans for the former food warehouse at 1209 Main St. where the Bargain Hunter Mall antique store is on the ground floor. The upper two stories are currently occupied by pigeons and rodents, but Alexander plans on putting 24 apartments into the space sometime in the next few years.

Back on the far-west end of the road, the renovation of the Lewis-Clark Hotel at 111 Main St. is an even longer-term project for Alexander. The exact shape of that project is far from being decided, but he said it will likely be a mixture of apartments for rent and condos for sale. Kramer said the level of demand for downtown condos isn’t known, but there is certainly some.

“There’s a growing contingent of retirees who want to have a place in downtown Lewiston where they can walk to amenities like the city library, the levee trail system and great shops and restaurants,” she said. “But they don’t want to rent. Those folks want to own.”

Kramer said she is unaware of any condominium properties available for sale downtown. But the clear demand for more residential opportunities in general can’t help but push investors like Alexander to add them to their portfolios.

Jon Lang is the owner of Ray J. White and Sons, a property management company that handles many of Alexander’s apartment rentals. He said the incremental pace of residential development downtown is the right approach because the extent of the new demand is unknown.

“With slow and steady growth, it’s been surprisingly successful,” Lang said. “We’re keeping them full and having no problems doing so. But there’s only so many people in Lewiston that can afford these kinds of apartments and are into downtown living. There is room for more now, though. We know that for sure.”

The Eichenberger Building at 515 and 517 Main St. is another property that could see significant investment. City officials condemned the structure in 2017 over an unauthorized commercial tenant and fire code violations, but former owners Ron and Sue Andrews of Lewiston fixed enough of the problems for the city to lift the condemnation.

A representative of new owners Flipside Properties LLC didn’t want to discuss specific plans, but said the company will probably remodel the upper-floor apartments.

Priced out?

The snowballing investments will surely bring joy to city planners and economic development officials who have been longing for a downtown building boom for years. But the other side of the story is the current residents of those properties who will probably not be able to afford the swanky new pads once they are built.

Kramer said part of the problem is a lack of low-income housing, not just downtown but across the Lewiston-Clarkston Valley. Social services can help relocate those people when they have to move, but cities, counties and economic development agencies can incentivize low-income housing development and point investors to federal tax credits that can help make those projects profitable.

“A vital community really depends on having everyone have access to living in that community,” she said. “That includes the waitstaff who brought you a really great bottle of wine at the dinner table and having them live a floor up and one unit over.”

And the downtown master plan doesn't cater to tourists or other visitors, instead placing the most importance on making the area a better place for those who already live there, she added.

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Loft tours

Beautiful Downtown Lewiston will offer a walking tour next month of at least four apartments and two buildings that may be rehabilitated into residential use in the future. The tour will be followed by a reception hosted by TD&H Engineering at 210 Main St. Tickets are \$20 per person in advance or \$25 at the door. The tour sold out last year, so Beautiful Downtown Lewiston is encouraging advance purchase.

When: 5:30 p.m. Sept. 12

Where: Beautiful Downtown Lewiston office, 301 Main St., Suite 103

Tickets: beautifuldowntownlewiston.com/events/loft-tours/