

Detroit's future is looking brighter

Experts: Transit, people are key

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Downtown Detroit is on a roll.

Even with the Tigers' stumble in the World Series, the team's resurgence all but guarantees that the glow of this year's magical baseball season will brighten downtown's fortunes next year and beyond.

At the very least, the Tigers' success means more than 2 million fans will visit Comerica Park next season, after a record 2.6 million came this year. That will create a stronger customer base for everything from restaurants and parking lots to taxis and souvenir hawkers.

It also validates the view of Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and other boosters that downtown -- a cold, empty symbol of urban decay for decades -- is on its way to a warmer, livelier, more entertaining future.

Lisa Rush, who works for data processing firm EDS in Auburn Hills, lives in Troy but just bought a small condo to use on weekends in the Lamar Building in the Brush Park area north of downtown.

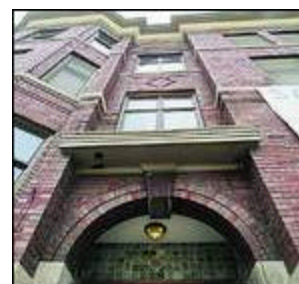
"When I first told people I was buying a summer home in Detroit, I got totally different reactions," Rush, 51, said last week. "My suburban friends thought I was nuts. My Detroit friends said 'Awesome!' But once my suburban friends understood the reasons and saw the place, they now say 'Cool!' "

An upbeat mayor couldn't agree more.

"We're not stopping now!" Kilpatrick promised during an interview at Comerica Park during the World Series. He said he believes 2007 "will see more development and more fine tuning of the downtown than in 2003 and 2004."

'Headed in the right direction'

A lot of work remains to be done downtown, and urban experts such as Mark Rosentraub, dean and professor of urban affairs at Cleveland State University, said Detroit remains in the early stages of its downtown resurgence.



Some suburbanites are finding a home in Detroit properties like the Lamar Building in Brush Park. (MARY SCHROEDER/Detroit Free Press)

Who gets credit for improvements

Downtown Detroit has benefited from a steady stream of events and trends in recent years. These are among the most important:

- **Super Bowl XL:** The National Football League's 2000 decision to award Detroit the 2006 Super Bowl sparked a multiyear effort to rid downtown of blight.

- **Compuware Corp.'s decision to move its headquarters downtown:** The

Obstacles that stand in the way of a total makeover here include the lack of convenient shopping for new residents and the lack of a mass transit system connecting downtown to the suburbs.

But even with the uncertainties, progress has been apparent across downtown because of a mix of milestones such as the World Series and the completion of several loft projects.

"Downtown is now headed in the right direction," Rosentraub said.

But he and other urban experts said downtown still has major obstacles to overcome:

- **Population.** A recent survey by Katherine Beebe & Associates reported that about 6,300 people lived in the core downtown area in 2005. While as many as 33,000 lived in the greater downtown, including the east riverfront to Belle Isle and the Woodward corridor up through New Center, Rosentraub estimates that the immediate downtown would need 15,000 to 20,000 residents to hit a critical mass.

"That's the number around which an entire neighborhood retail business center will comfortably exist. And once you have one of those going, then it becomes self-sustaining," he said.

- **The lack of a business improvement district, or BID.** In a BID, downtown businesses agree to a special tax to pay for cleanup, marketing, security and other services. Efforts to create a BID downtown have failed because of opposition from some property owners and elected officials.

Christopher Leinberger, an urban expert with the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., agrees that Detroit's downtown makeover will be stillborn without a BID.

"There is not a downtown turnaround that has happened without a BID," he said. He noted that Roger Penske, chairman of the civic group Downtown Detroit Partnership, has created BID-like services this year, including a cleanup program, by soliciting private contributions. But that's a stopgap.

"There'll be funder fatigue setting in very quickly if no BID is in place in nine months," Leinberger said. "Don't expect Roger Penske to be able to constantly lean on his buddies to do that for you. A BID's essential."

- **Lack of a mass transit system.** Leinberger noted that Washington, D.C., has attracted some \$100 billion in new development around its Metro transit stations. And the development is geared to the younger, professional, creative class that wants to live in a city.

Development deals in works

Despite these misgivings, the multiple positive trends mean even the most

company announced its decision in 1999 and bought thousands of employees downtown, filling up many of the new restaurants and shops that followed, including a Hard Rock Café and the downtown's first Borders bookstore.

- **Detroit's 2001 Tricentennial celebrations:** These set in motion the effort to leave a permanent downtown memorial of some kind. That led to the creation of Campus Martius Park, which opened in 2004.

- **The opening of three temporary casinos:** Beginning in 1999, the casinos -- the MGM Grand Detroit, MotorCity and Greektown -- have brought more people downtown.

- **A nationwide trend toward urban living:** This previously enriched the downtowns of Chicago and other cities, but is now bringing young, well-educated professionals to Detroit's new lofts and town houses.

John Gallagher

Downtown's got a 'trendy adult' vibe

A study released last week at the annual University of Michigan-Urban Land Institute

optimistic visions for downtown Detroit no longer sound so far-fetched. Talking about downtown's future during the World Series, Kilpatrick vowed to make even the derelict Capitol Park district west of Woodward into a Greenwich Village-style enclave of lofts and shopping.

Among other improvements in the works: Two of Detroit's three permanent casinos -- the MotorCity and the MGM Grand Detroit -- are under construction and will be ready or in the final stages by next year's World Series. Construction on the Greektown Casino should be well under way by then.

Site work began recently on the city's new Rosa Parks Transit Center, a modernistic bus terminal along Cass, north of Michigan.

With the Book-Cadillac Hotel renovation under way, Kilpatrick said the city would turn its attention to three more of its major dilapidated buildings -- the David Whitney and Broderick Tower on either side of Woodward at Grand Circus Park, and the Lafayette Building on Lafayette near Griswold.

Development deals have been in the works on the Broderick Tower and the Lafayette Building but have suffered delays. Kilpatrick said the city would push to make those deals happen.

Of course, all these deals are subject to the delays and setbacks endemic in urban redevelopment. And hopes that Rock Financial or another big corporation may move downtown might go unfulfilled, as other hopes have before.

Even if specific developments can't be guaranteed, it seems clear that more progress is on the way -- including in and around Comerica Park. Karen Cullen, a spokeswoman for Tigers' owner Mike Ilitch, said Ilitch Holdings would move ahead with plans to upgrade its various properties near the Fox Theatre, as well as look at upgrades to the ballpark.

"Just like any venue, you want to keep it fresh and new for fans," Cullen said. "You've got to change it up, make it something people want to come to."

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Real Estate Forum in Detroit found that the new downtown residents are younger, better educated and wealthier than expected, with average household incomes of close to \$60,000 a year.

The study, produced by the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program in partnership with the University of Michigan Taubman School of Architecture & Urban Planning, also placed downtown Detroit closer to the "trendy adult" end of a spectrum and saw downtowns such as St. Louis and Pittsburgh closer to the "comfortable" end of the graph.

"Detroit has an edginess to it. I think the young, vibrant crowd finds that appealing," said John Talmage, president of Social Compact, a data analysis firm based in Washington, D.C., that did the analysis for the study. "It's more than urbanity, it's edgy."

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