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Development of past 10 years has made once-dormant downtown Lancaster thrive with business

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LANCASTER — Downtown Lancaster is a thriving area with numerous restaurants, shops and nightlife spots. Foot and vehicular traffic are usually plentiful. But it wasn't always that way.

Ten years ago city and business leaders were trying to figure out how to spur growth in a downtown that needed an economic revival. In those early stages, the city asked Ohio State University students to form a plan on how to do that.

How it Was

Tracie Lynn's Collection owner Tracie Dowdy opened her downtown business in 2008. She said the downtown then was not like it is now.

"Lot of empty storefronts, lot of things were closing," Dowdy said. "It's grown a lot, definitely."

She said part of the credit goes to Destination Downtown Lancaster and its various directors over the years. Dowdy is a former DDL and Special Improvement District board member, having served on each for six years.

"They've really brought attention to downtown and people have come downtown and put their businesses in," Dowdy said of DDL directors. "That's made a difference."

She also said tourists passing through on the way to and from Hocking Hills have helped as they support some of the downtown businesses.

Company Wrench owner Brad Hutchinson is a lifetime city resident. He said he was more focused on his business 10 years ago. But he recently invested about \$4 million into

renovating the Mithoff building at Main and Columbus streets. It was in danger of being demolished before he turned it into a mixed-use building with both residential and commercial tenants.

"Growing up as a kid, even until the last 10 years the downtown had really become an eyesore in a lot of ways," he said. "But certainly in the last seven or eight years, we've made great strides in bringing some of the buildings back to life and cleaning stuff up."

Hutchinson said he travels a lot for business and thinks it's a nationwide movement to bring downtown areas back to life. He said people see value in old buildings.

"A lot of downtowns had reached disparity," Hutchinson said. "Not just here, but every small city or mid-size city in the United States. People had left the downtowns to go to places like shopping malls. But now in the last 10 years, it seems like there is a resurgence for people to come back downtown and revitalize them.

"So I don't think it's just here. I think it's a premise that's happening across the country and we got on the bandwagon along with everybody else. People got away from the walkable cities with everybody driving vehicles. Where now a lot of people are going back to those walkable areas."

Hutchinson said he will never make a financial return on the Mithoff renovation, but said he loved the building as a child. He said he didn't renovate the building to make money.

"I was one of the first contractors in 2000 when they wanted to condemn the building in looking to try and repair it," he said. "I talked to the New York realty guys (who owned the building) at that point who were not flexible at all in what they wanted to do with the building. It was just a situation where I knew if I didn't step in it was going to get torn down. It was either going to be me or the building was going to disappear."

The building did not disappear, though, and is one of the cornerstones of downtown. Hutchinson said there were no plans to redevelop the site if the city would have torn the Mithoff down.

"With all the new restrictions I think any new building that would have been built would not have near the impact as this building had by staying," he said. "And I don't know that some of the other revitalization would have been as important to people had this building went down."

Hutchinson the loss of the Mithoff may have led to other beings being demolished.

The Plan

A lot of the downtown growth stems from the 2013 OSU students' plan. Current DDL Executive Director Amanda Everitt said the plan was extremely ambitious and comprehensive, but an achievable plan. It focused on several areas, including entertainment, parking, transportation and branding.

"It had great insights into how we can think about growing the future within our downtown," she said. "I still look to that plan to this day. There are so many key components that haven't changed as far as place making, walkability, historic preservation and how it all ties back to economic development."

She said the city saw growth and results when investing in some parts of the plan.

The plan touched on several components, including entertainment options during both day and evening hours. Everitt said major steps in that direction were creating a revitalization district and allowing for more downtown establishments to have a liquor license in that district.

"What we saw then was more restaurants popping up and more desire to be within the downtown district," she said. "Then with the creation of the open-refreshment area, what we saw was more people utilizing those. More people coming to sip and stroll and it's been extremely successful."

The open-refreshment area runs from High Street to Memorial Drive and Walnut to Wheeling streets. If a patron asks any liquor establishment in that area for a to-go cup they can legally walk around with their drink from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. seven days a week.

The OSU plan also called for the development of the former Lancaster Glass site at Memorial Drive and Main Street called the Gateway. The site is now cleared for development and Fairfield Homes plans to build market-rate housing on it. Everitt said the pandemic pushed the original 2020 groundbreaking to probably 2022.

The OSU plan also called for better bicycle access and safety downtown. Everitt said that part of the plan has not been completed but is still a priority.

The OSU students also studied parking downtown and concluded that the downtown had too much of it.

"But that it was privately owned and confusing as to where people could park and when," Everitt said. "And that there were too many businesses that had private parking that were

only using them for a portion of the day. The plan encouraged public and private partnerships to more clearly define when those lots were being used."

Now there are several private lots downtown that allow public parking on nights and weekends and are notated by signs.

Challenging Times

City council president David Uhl is a former DDL executive director who served from 2010 to 2012.

"That particular time in our history the economy was in the tank," he said. "We had new businesses come and go, smaller shops and things like that. But it was a time when things were challenging for downtown and for the city and across the nation because the economy was not in good shape."

Therefore, Uhl said the downtown 10 years ago is nothing like it is today. He called the downtown's growth in the past 10 years unbelievable.

He said DDL was working on a 10-year vision plan of its own when he was with the agency that focused on some particular things. Uhl said that plan was different from the OSU student plan. He said numerous others people helped with the plan, including downtown business owners, government officials, residents and more.

"Some of those things were events and events have really exploded downtown," Uhl said.

He mentioned major events like the downtown holiday tree lighting, art walk and chocolate walk and said their purpose is to draw people downtown.

The DDL 10-year vision plan also focused on the Gateway portion of downtown near Main Street and Memorial Drive.

"We wanted something at the Gateway site," Uhl said. "We had said maybe something like the North Market (in Columbus). That was sort of the idea or suggestion. Well, today we know it's going to be houses and apartments. That's a great use. But if focused our efforts and attention on that site."

He said another focus of the 10-year plan, which the OSU students used as a starting point for their plan, was the South Broad Street area. Today, Fairfield Heating & Cooling, Specialty RV Lancaster and The Mill occupy that area.

Uhl said the Mithoff Building was another focus of the DDL plan.

"We called for a new build in our plan," he said. "We didn't think that building was salvageable. We didn't think there was anyone who was going to put the kind of money into it that it needed, and then along came Brad. We wanted something. We didn't care what it was."

There was also talk about 10 years ago of building a performing arts center downtown modeled off of the Niswonger Performing Arts Center in Van Wert. That vision has not become a reality, though.

"I don't know where we'd put a performing arts center in the immediate downtown today," Uhl said. "And I don't know where we'd find the parking for it."

The Present and Future

Like Everitt, Uhl said the open-refreshment area has been a key to downtown's revival.

"The entertainment district that we were able to set up allowed for liquor licenses to be pulled into that district," he said. "Downtown businesses were able to take advantage of those when liquor licenses were either really expensive as people were selling them off from other restaurants or there were just no more available for the area. So those five additional licenses made an impact and restaurants really were the start."

Uhl also said various shop openings and the opening of Art & Clay on Main around 2010 also helped spark the downtown revival.

"Over the evolution of downtown this past decade, if it were a weeknight and you drove downtown you could park anyplace you wanted on the street," he said. "But when you go through downtown now it's just packed at nights because we've got these great establishments that are open later and that are offering value for people that are looking for something to do."

For the future, Uhl said there's always more to do.

"I think we still have a few buildings that we'd like to see renovated and come back to useful and productive activity," he said. "I think we'll continue to see a churn of business just like every place where someone may move out and someone else has the opportunity to move in."

"I think there's great things in store for downtown and it's really up to the people of Lancaster to continue to support, to continue to provide thoughts and ideas to leaders as to what they'd like to see downtown. Then for those who have opportunity to have influence to make those things happen."

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