

Downtown Rising touts Rochester developments

Written by Diana Louise Carter Staff writer
Jun. 04

democratandchronicle.com

Downtown redevelopment is “absolutely stunning,” according to Heidi Zimmer-Meyer, and the six presenters at the “Downtown Rising” event Tuesday seemed to back her up.

The event, coordinated by the Rochester Downtown Development Corp., shared news of quirky events and major overhauls of iconic retail and office buildings downtown. And these are just a sampling of nearly \$700 million in ongoing development in the center city.

RDDC President Zimmer-Meyer said the organization started holding these annual events when it became apparent that downtown was starting to experience a resurgence after what she described as a “30-year dry spell.”

Tuesday’s lunchtime event, which drew about 350 people to the Rochester Radisson Hotel, included several rainmakers attempting to end that dry spell.

Projects described ran from a redevelopment of the historic and former Rochester Savings Bank building into a business training center, remaking of both Sibley and Midtown towers, a guerrilla design group that takes aim at public spaces, what could be the largest skate park in North America, and an eco-festival that has grown into a six-day event including music, film, ecology and redevelopment of the High Falls area.

“We have become very good in this community in dealing with decline,” Zimmer-Meyer said. But now, she said, “We need to change our mindset to manage growth.”

The Downtown Rising event helps share that mindset as an eclectic mix of presenters talked about what they’re doing and, in some cases, gave hints about surprises to come.

“All I can say is, 66 percussionists on a bridge,” teased Michael Philipson, president of the PhilipsonGroup and co-founder of GardenAerial and the growing Greentopia festival. Philipson said High Falls is a world-class site, owing to its waterfall within a canyon in the middle of a unique city.

Greentopia has grown from a two-day eco-festival to include six days of ecology demonstrations, music, documentary films and other features. It drew 23,000 people last year.

Developer Larry Glazer, whose Buckingham Properties is working with Morgan Management on redeveloping Midtown Tower, said he expects work to begin this year and be complete by the end of 2014.

Glazer reminded the audience that Buckingham is also in the process of buying nearby Xerox Tower, and renamed the area “The Tower District.” He alluded to the Xerox building’s former amenities, including Shakespeare’s restaurant and an ice rink, but didn’t elaborate on potential plans for that building.

There were plenty of other plans laid out, though, from artistic renderings of apartments at “The Tower at Midtown” to drawings of a remade interior of Sibley Tower, featuring the clock that old-time Rochesterians used as a meeting place when shopping downtown.

“We intend to bring back Sibley’s to what it was and even better,” vowed Gilbert Winn, managing principal for Boston-based WinnCompanies, which bought the former department store and attached office tower. The remake will include a ground floor of retail shops, second floor of retail and office, and offices on the third through sixth floors of the former store. The tower would be reconfigured into 160 to 200 housing units.

Winn said he hopes Monroe Community College will reverse course and remain in the building instead of moving to property owned by Eastman Kodak Co. on State Street. But should MCC move, he said, the company will find someone else to lease the space.

dt ogilvie, dean and professor at the Saunders College of Business at Rochester Institute of Technology, said the college hopes to open its Center for Urban Entrepreneurship in the historic former Rochester Savings Bank building on Franklin Street in the fall. The building will be used as a training center for people who live in disadvantaged parts of the city, offering education in how to start and maintain a business.

“Once people see they can get into business and earn their own living, it really changes their whole outlook, particularly the youth,” ogilvie said.

James Maddison, a grant writer for the city who also is president of the nonprofit Friends of the Roc City Skatepark, said he was looking for a place to skate with his kids but ended up with a plan for what could be the largest skate park in North America.

The park will be situated near and under the east side of the Frederick Douglass-Susan B. Anthony Memorial Bridge. Maddison described the project as “urban park with essentially skateable art.” It could bring \$1.8 million of retail spending into the city each year from skaters visiting, he said.

Jennifer Indovina, CEO of Tenrehte Technologies and co-founder of RocCity2.0, shared her belief that “If you hang out a little more in your city, you will love it.” RocCity2.0 choreographed the guerrilla installation last year of signs in the center city guiding people to attractions and advising them on how long it takes by foot and bike. Total cost: Four months of planning, \$700, and one night of installation.

Connecting multiple attractions makes a space more livable, she said. “If you have a cafe next to a movie theater and it’s around the corner from your home, bonus, you win, especially with the young people,” Indovina said.