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CCC celebrates 30 years of rejuvenation

By Amos Maki
Contact
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When John Dudas was named the first executive director of the Center City Commission (CCC) in 1977, Downtown was in a death spiral.

"There was only one restaurant, The Rendezvous," said Dudas, who had recently moved to Memphis from Miami. "The Peabody was closed and there really weren't any hotels you would want to stay in.

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"The retailers were closing left and right and, of course, hardly anybody lived Downtown at that time," said Dudas, vice president and director of strategic planning for Belz Enterprises, the family-owned company that has played a key role in transforming Downtown.

On Thursday, more than 500 people packed The Peabody's Grand Ballroom to celebrate 30 years of Downtown rejuvenation by the CCC -- the public-private agency responsible for guiding development in the Central Business Improvement District -- and to plan for the next 30 years of renewal.

Before the midday event started, images of Downtown's past -- abandoned and decaying buildings and streets

-- were contrasted on the ballroom's big screens with scenes of the present -- high-dollar condos under construction, vibrant street images and packed parks.

"I did think Downtown Memphis would be one of the great downtowns in the United States, which I think it is now, and I was hoping it would happen even faster but as you get older you learn things take longer than you think," Dudas said. "I think we've done very well under the conditions."

But Dudas and others instrumental in the Downtown turnaround said that while great strides have been made, including \$3 billion worth of current investment, there is still plenty of heavy lifting to be done.

"Make no mistake, it is a work in progress," said CCC president Jeff Sanford, who was first appointed in 1998. "The past is the past and the danger is that we get into a comfort zone."

To help fight against complacency setting in, the CCC brought in Brad Segal, president of Denver-based Progressive Urban Management Associates, and a recognized authority on Downtown trends and issues.

Segal spoke about global changes and issues that are affecting urban development nationwide and how those events could shape what happens in Downtown Memphis.

"We really are entering a whole new era of opportunity and challenge in downtown development," Segal said.

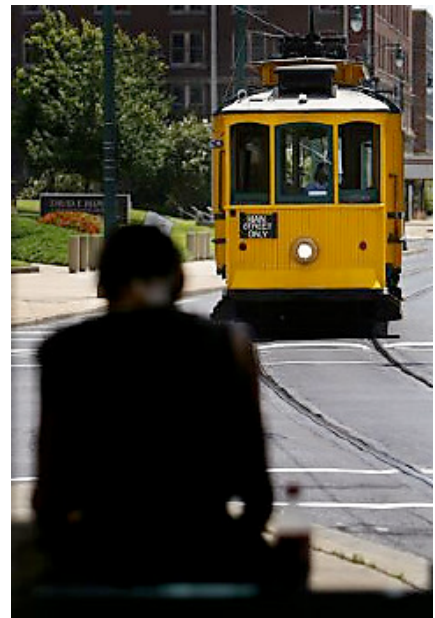
Demographic and lifestyle issues, combined with changes in growing powers like India and China, will play a key role in shaping American downtowns, including Memphis, Segal said.



Photos by Mark Weber/The Commercial Appeal

Paige Maddox (left) and Anthony Feikert, both 15, blow their duck whistles before a Ride the Ducks tour. They are in Memphis with a group from Quincy, Ill.

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Passengers wait for the trolley near Beale Street Thursday afternoon. Downtown trends expert Brad Segal, president of Denver-based Progressive Urban Management Associates, said mass transit systems will be increasingly important to the development of cities and

America is growing older, more educated and more connected to the world.

Increasingly, more and more of the 77 million Americans born into the baby boom generation are looking to "downsize" their lifestyles and are choosing downtowns, Segal said.

At the same time, the 70 million "millennials" -- people born between 1977 and 2003 -- raised on technology and known for their opened-mindedness, diversity and tolerance, will also increasingly choose to live downtown.

"In general, these trends are favorable for vibrant downtowns," Segal said. "The younger and older markets are predisposed to living downtown."

It's already happening in Memphis.

According to a CCC demographic study, 44 percent of Downtown's residents are 45 or older. And one-third of Downtown's residents have moved to the area from other states or countries.

Segal also said it will be increasingly important for cities and downtowns to attract and retain the highly motivated entrepreneurs of the "creative class," a term popularized by author Richard Florida that refers to the 25- to 34-year-old group.

While Memphis is facing challenges in this area -- more 25- to 34-year-olds are leaving the city than are coming to it -- Segal said, Downtown has been holding its own.

That age group is the largest in the "high-growth areas" of Downtown, accounting for 29 percent of the population in the Mud Island, Downtown Core and South Main District areas.

Residents in those areas are also well-educated. Over 35 percent of the adult residents there have a graduate or professional degree and 37 percent of them have a bachelor's degree.

To attract more of the "creative class" and "millennials" who will have to replace the baby boomers, particularly women who are swelling the ranks of higher education, Downtown should be safe, clean and laden with retail and active recreational areas.

To keep those workers as they age, it will be critical for Downtown to offer amenities that cater to families, including quality schools, parks and recreational activities, Segal said.

And changes in India and China -- with their huge populations, emerging economies and voracious appetite for natural resources -- will have a profound impact on downtowns, including in Memphis, Segal said.

As global demand for building materials increases and construction costs continue to rise, adaptive reuse of older buildings should become more appealing, Segal said.

Plus, a continued increase in fuel prices could encourage more Americans to ditch long drives to the suburbs in favor of living in downtown areas, which usually have well-established mass transit systems that are typically more integrated, making it easier to walk to work or the store.

Sanford said the CCC will be busy preparing for the future.

"We cannot control the global trends and influences (Segal) described," Sanford said. "But what we can and must do is plan to meet the challenges they represent."

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More info:

Center City commission annual luncheon

On Thursday, the Center City Commission celebrated 30 years of Downtown development and discussed ways to prepare for the future.

To learn more, visit downtownmemphis.com

The CCC also recognized several groups and individuals for their contributions to Downtown.

Vision Award for individual: John Stokes.

Vision Award for an organization: Memphis Development Foundation/Orpheum theater

Lifetime Achievement Award: Charlie Vergos.

Special Award of Merit: Streets Ministries.

Special Award of Merit: City of Memphis Fire Department for fighting blazes that ripped through Downtown in October.

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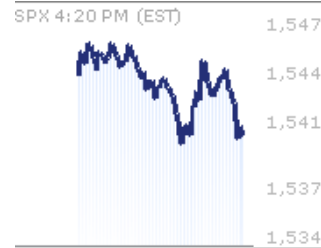
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