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What downtown needs is a sense of urgency

By: Staff Writer

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On the day I was hired at the Winnipeg Free Press, I stood on the north side of Portage Avenue and looked east towards Main Street with an appetite to familiarize myself with the city I would soon call home.

It was September 1986 and as I walked out of the paper's old office building on Carlton Street, I could tell Winnipeg was going to be a different urban experience.

Portage Avenue was a mess. Empty, rundown storefronts dominated. It was quite a change from Toronto, where I was born, and Calgary, where I had been working up till then. And yet, there seemed to be the will to save the downtown. The construction of Portage Place mall was well under way. The Forks was still just a collection of abandoned warehouses but there were plans already in motion to turn it into a new hub for downtown.

As I looked down to the iconic intersection of Portage and Main, I wondered what this stretch of downtown Winnipeg would look like when all these projects were completed. More than 20 years later, I can't help but feel that the more things have changed, the more they stayed the same.

That is not to say there hasn't been progress: The Forks has become a thriving tourist attraction; the Red River College campus on Princess Street is a wonderful mix of old and new; Old Market Square is one of THE places to be seen in the summer. Add in the MTS Centre, the Mountain Equipment Co-op re-development, CanWest Global Park, home of the Goldeyes, and Waterfront Drive, and you've got change.

And yet, I can't help but look at the empty buildings on Portage Avenue across from the MTS Centre and wonder why downtown has not been transformed. We were promised nothing less.

The odd thing is that we know that the kind of renaissance we long for here has been achieved in cities like Seattle, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Baltimore. Free Press reporter Bartley Kives recently reported on the rapid and dramatic redevelopment of downtown Fargo, North Dakota. Prior to that, reporter Mary Agnes Welch profiled a similar success story in De Moines, Iowa.

What do all these places have that Winnipeg doesn't have? It would take too much space to point out all the important strategic differences but one element that consistently seems to be present in those communities is a sense of urgency. That is a commodity that just doesn't seem to exist in Winnipeg.

Urgency can take many forms but in many communities, it appears in the form of direct, aggressive public funding delivered in meaningful ways. It's an agenda that says we want change sooner, rather than later.

In Fargo, as was the case in the other communities mentioned above, the funding took the form of tax credits. Businesses and individuals who were willing to build, redevelop and live in those areas of downtown most in need of attention received significant property and income tax credits.

The economics behind tax credits is simple: Give people a tax break as an incentive to do something that government really needs done. You need more people living downtown? Give people a deal that is so good, they can't stay away. Want to save a heritage building? Make it so financially attractive that developers will fight over each other for the chance.

In most cases, tax credits do not cost government much money. Buildings that are empty and in severe disrepair, or plots of land that sit undeveloped, are of little value to property owners or tax collectors. A tax holiday now, in exchange for new construction or rehabilitation of existing buildings, creates value down the road. And the best part is the redevelopment takes place sooner rather than later.

Tax credits are available here, although in classic Winnipeg fashion, the programs are too small and limited to make much impact. How do we know that? Take away publicly funded mega projects such as The Forks, the MTS Centre and Red River College, and you'll see little evidence the private sector is flocking downtown of its own accord.

It was once believed those larger projects would be a catalyst to lure the private sector to spend its money downtown, and reunite suburban Winnipeggers with the core. Clearly our targets aren't buying it.

More than two decades after the first spate of downtown re-development, we're still waiting for the core to bustle with new life. Instead of a new downtown, we have the old downtown with a few new buildings.

A new downtown remains within our grasp. All we would have to do is find that sense of urgency that's been utilized in other communities, but which has alluded this community.

And we should do it soon.

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