

Downtown rising

Big plans: SLC in for extreme makeover

Utah capital's business owners are 'giddy with excitement' over projects

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Builders and bureaucrats revel in its rarity: a comprehensive metropolitan makeover that includes a new downtown core, a cultural upgrade and a condo boom.

Yet all of that and more will coalesce in downtown Salt Lake City - mostly through private cash - during the next five years. For much of that time, construction crews will outnumber retailers.

"Downtown Salt Lake City, pound for pound, has more going on than any city in America," developer Bruce Bingham told a roomful of power brokers Wednesday.

Perched on the top floor of a capital high-rise, Utah's governor joined Salt Lake City's mayor, business titans, key developers and financial captains for an overhead look at what has been dubbed "Downtown Rising."

New in the blueprint: The possibility of stretching residential units along dilapidated Regent Street, including at the old Tribune Building, anchored by street-level specialty shops. A new condo tower on the corner of Regent and 100 South could be coming - directly south of an entry point to the LDS Church's \$1.5 billion City Creek Center. Regent eventually could be connected to Main Street.

Stakeholders also are contemplating the relocation of the Salt Lake Art Center from Abravanel Hall plaza to a lot across from the Gallivan Center on Regent and 200 South. That could clear space near Abravanel for a Broadway-class theater, creating a mini-Kennedy Center adjacent to the Salt Palace Convention Center.

In addition, new office towers and hotels are coming to The Gateway district (Hyatt Place will be done next summer). The 100-year-old Boston Building is being renovated just east of Main near 350 South while cranes are erecting a glass skyscraper on 222 S. Main. A hotel could sprout on Arrow Press Square. And scores of urban lofts are being leased or built from Pioneer Park to Marmalade west of Capitol Hill.

"You can see why we're giddy with excitement," said Bob Farrington, executive director of the Downtown Alliance.

Out-of-state developers were on hand for the showcase, designed, Farrington said, to spotlight downtown's "energy."

Still, the price tag to overhaul the two blocks directly south of City Creek - both are in a redevelopment area - is estimated near \$700 million.

Capital planners also are considering Main Street's Utah Theater as a future Broadway home, though any renovation would require the removal of a Rocky Mountain Power substation in the rear. A location for a downtown theater - Sandy is plowing forward with its own mega-playhouse plan - is expected to be settled by late spring.

Architect Prescott Muir, who is completing a cultural-district master plan for the city, said theater planners hope to use a historic building for "authenticity."

"That's one of the things that distinguishes us from the suburbs," he told the group. "We have that kind of nitty-gritty character."

Mayor Ralph Becker argued Salt Lake City is uniquely suited as the state's commercial, educational, financial and religious center - all with an "unparalleled" natural setting. As such, he said, "I don't think there is any downtown in any city of this country that has the potential we have."

Some economic trends back that rationale, according to Jim Wood, director of the Bureau of Economic and Business Research at the University of Utah.

He noted the capital's hotel occupancy is the highest in 10 years, while the 40-block central business district boasts 65,000 jobs.

Despite Main Street's massive mall makeover, retail sales reached a record level last year, Wood said, buoyed by a resurgence in restaurants, which now account for 50 percent of downtown revenue. Retail numbers have climbed steadily since the Interstate 15 rebuild and The Gateway's opening in 2001.

One challenge, Wood said, is to add office space - a trend that has slowed since a 1980s boom. Even so, office jobs account for 82 percent of downtown employment and 90 percent of wages.

Wood said the central business district also can accommodate up to 3,000 more housing units - beyond the 700 to 900 planned at City Creek - given the empty nesters and overall growth of the area. Unlike the condo surge of the late 1970s, this time the market mostly is ready, Wood said.

"The question is how deep is that market?" he asked. "We don't know."

Developers concede they are in on the gamble. They are betting downtown's \$223,000 average condo value will vault.

Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. told the business leaders to strap in for the "wild ride," which he suggested could occur only in the nation's "most preferred state."

Downtown's biggest flaw: Traffic lights still are unsynchronized. Becker joked that he and the governor expect to remedy that as soon as they solve "poverty, climate change and world peace."