

Detroit Free Press

October 6, 2008

Book Cadillac's big day is today as city's rebirth continues

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The opening of the Westin Book Cadillac hotel this morning shows that downtown Detroit's revival is still moving forward, even if blunted by an ailing economy and nationwide credit crunch.

Doors are scheduled to open at the hotel at 11 a.m. The hotel's ballrooms, meeting rooms and the Boulevard Room restaurant will open today. Travelers can book rooms for overnight stays beginning later this week.

If the reopening of the Book Cadillac after 24 years of dormancy shows the downtown revival is alive, it also emphasizes what some call the "trendy adult" nature of that revival.

Downtown investment is overwhelmingly geared toward entertainment and special events, including casino gaming, sports and edgy nightclubs. The Book Cadillac will help serve that entertainment market.

"Your downtown is evolving as the bad boy of downtowns, somewhat akin to Las Vegas," Christopher Leinberger, a real estate professor at the University of Michigan who lives in Washington, D.C., said Friday.

Citing Detroit's concentration of three downtown casinos, three major-league sports venues and theaters including the Fox and the Detroit Opera House, Leinberger added: "Those are very interesting and unique urban entertainment anchors to have. There really isn't another city in the country that has that combination."

Everyday participants in the revival also emphasize the "cool factor."

Tom Carleton, who with his brother, Dave, own and renovate downtown properties, have a tentative deal with the city to do a \$3-million renovation of the long-vacant GAR building at Cass and Grand River. Noting the unique geometry of the 108-year-old castle-like structure, he said, "There's no doubt in our mind this would be one of the coolest office spaces in between New York and Los Angeles."

Contrasting Detroit with Washington, Leinberger noted that the nation's capital has relied more on museums and other cultural institutions for its downtown revival. Almost no other city has Detroit's concentration of entertainment venues all within walking distance.

Office space, retail still hurting

This "trendy adult" identity, as Leinberger calls it, offsets downtown Detroit's shortcomings. If entertainment investment, including the \$190-million makeover of the Book Cadillac, has been

booming, the office market downtown suffers vacancy rates that are the highest in southeast Michigan, running around 25%, even in the best buildings.

The office market downtown has suffered from years of company downsizing and relocations to the suburbs.

"It's a tough market, and will continue to be so," said Mark Talley, vice president of the office brokerage firm Grubb & Ellis. "I don't see that changing any time soon."

Meanwhile, retail remains anemic.

Robin Boyle, a professor of geography and urban planning at Wayne State University, says Detroit -- with that key exception -- is far along its path to revival.

"That last element, that critical element of shopping, of activity to keep people on the street and moving through downtown, is still lacking," he said. "And that is a critical third. We've got good infrastructure, we've got places to visit, we've got things to do, but we don't have the retail."

Meanwhile, downtown's budding residential boom of a few years ago has been stymied by the national housing slump and credit crunch. Although most of the condominiums on the Book Cadillac's upper floors have sold -- a handful for \$1 million or more -- virtually all other residential developments downtown have stalled.

Big events, big success

Those setbacks aside, the reopening of the Book Cadillac has energized a downtown leadership already confident from successfully hosting a string of major sporting events, including Super Bowl XL and the World Series in 2006 and the 2005 baseball All-Star Game.

The planning and teamwork that contributed in those events has carried over to newer challenges, like hosting the NCAA basketball Final Four tournament at Ford Field in April, said Ann Lang, president of the civic group Downtown Detroit Partnership.

"Luckily we learned how to do a lot of things for the Super Bowl," she said.

The Book Cadillac no doubt will contribute to downtown's ability to host special events, like the annual North American International Auto Show at Cobo Center.

Scott Stinebaugh, the hotel's director of sales, said the hotel is already fully booked for the January 2009 auto show.

"We're one more amenity to that larger piece of the pie," he said. "We look at the Book Cadillac as another reason to come down and visit Detroit. Whether you're going to stay, whether you're going to dine, or whether you're just curious, we certainly think the Book Cadillac is a pivotal point in the next chapter for Detroit."

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