

Idaho Business Review

Brookings Institution scholar calls Boise downtown 'remarkable'

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Urban land use strategist and developer Christopher Leinberger of The Brookings Institution said he's had his eye on Boise's downtown for about 12 years, and he loves what he sees.

Leinberger, an advocate of pedestrian-oriented, mixed use "urban walkability," said he ranks Boise's downtown as the best in the Rocky Mountain West and one of the seven best in the country out of the 121 American cities with 250,000 to 750,000 people.

"This is a remarkable downtown," said Leinberger, keynote speaker at the Downtown Boise Association's annual State of Downtown meeting at the Boise Centre on the Grove today. "We need you as a model."

He said Boise's downtown is "well in front" of most other cities with its mix of urban entertainment, retail, housing and office employment in creating a "transformative place" with experiences that can only be obtained here.

Leinberger also pointed to huge market shifts that have been taking shape since the mid-1990s. Demand for city living has been rising and is expected to explode over the next 20 years with only 14 percent of new households predicted to have school-age children. He predicts that will result in a continued shift away from the suburbs.

He did urge Boise leaders to create more downtown residential development; build infrastructure like rail transit and a streetcar system; and step up management of adjacent areas to downtown.

In response to a question, he also urged the city to convert one-way streets back to two-way roads to improve the flow of traffic, which earned him some applause from the audience.

Also during the meeting:

- Karen Sander, executive director of the Downtown Boise Association, said statistics show that downtown Boise is continuing to thrive even during the current recession. Office vacancy is currently 9.5 percent, compared with 14.6 percent for the entire Treasure Valley. She said retail vacancy is less than 12 percent, with 30 new tenants replacing departing businesses over the past year.
- Mayor Dave Bieter noted that Boise recently landed on "another top 10 list." The Brookings Institution ranked the Boise metro area as fourth best of its size for the least amount of job sprawl, with jobs concentrated in the city center.