

KC's downtown 'back in the game,' but development expert warns other cities are, too



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From economic ignominy a couple decades ago, Kansas City's downtown has re-emerged as an entertainment, cultural and residential hot spot with a new streetcar line that connects assets and builds walkable neighborhoods.

"But you have a lot of competition," warned Christopher Leinberger, a Washington, D.C.-based developer, business professor and urban theorist who was the keynote speaker Friday at the Downtown Council's annual luncheon meeting.

Leinberger cited downtown improvements in Washington, Detroit, Seattle, Boston, Cincinnati, Miami, Phoenix and Chattanooga, Tenn. — most of them fueled by transportation decisions or strong private-sector planning and investment.

"The feds aren't going to do it, except maybe 20 to 30 percent of funding," he told about 1,000 attendees at the Kansas City Convention Center. Rather, it's incumbent on cities to raise their own taxes and for real estate developers to "give back" and help pay for redevelopment, he said.

Leinberger gave Kansas City big thumbs-up for the catalytic development of the streetcar line connecting the River Market to Crown Center. But "it's critical to build the second phase," he said of the line's proposed expansion south to the Country Club Plaza and the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Transportation, Leinberger emphasized, isn't just a system to move people from place to place; it's a system to spark economic development by providing public transportation, bike lanes and paths, and sidewalks that build vibrant neighborhoods.

Increasingly, he said, sought-after neighborhoods — with premium price points for real estate — are in metropolitan cores, not suburbia. Even in suburban communities, he said, their downtowns and shopping centers are being redeveloped to reflect the new urbanism.

"Business parks are being hollowed out, regional malls are being bulldozed," Leinberger said.

A series of other speakers, including Mayor Sly James and Downtown Council officers, extolled downtown's recent resurgence with new guest lodging, apartments and entertainment venues. The importance of the streetcar was repeatedly touted, and a version of a rap video by Kemet the Phantom, featuring the streetcar, earned rousing applause.

Speakers also pointed to current priorities: advocating for matching funds from the state to build the UMKC Downtown Campus for the Arts; supporting Kansas City's \$800 million bond package on the April ballot; extending the streetcar line; and breaking ground this year on a new hotel to improve the city's ability to compete for large conventions.

The importance of convention hotels was highlighted in a tribute to Albert P. Mauro, a leader in multiple civic endeavors who received the Philip Kirk Jr. Award, the council's highest honor. Among many Kansas City projects that Mauro helped bring about was development of the Vista hotel, now the downtown Marriott.

Five individuals also were acknowledged as the council's Urban Heroes, annual awards for helping improve downtown's residential, recreational and commercial status. The 2017 recipients are: Andrew Bracker, brownfields coordinator for the city; Vince Bryant, with 3D Development; Deb Churchill, with the City Market; Julie Nelson Meers, with mobank; and Matt Staub, a streetcar advocate.

The council also honored Jason Klumb, who recently resigned the top General Services Administration post in Kansas City, for his service to the metro area.

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