



FROM THE MAYOR

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Past, present and future of downtown converge



By Mayor
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To borrow a sailing metaphor, the Prior Lake of today is a community with the wind at its back, pushing the city forward toward new and exciting horizons. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the downtown environment.

Do you remember what downtown looked like just a little more than four years ago? What a difference a few years has made. A transformation that was ignited by the construction of Lakefront Plaza has continued in recent years with upgrades to a dozen downtown storefronts, introduction of a new streetscape, completion of wonderful new buildings like the Speiker & Co. facility, and the arrival of new businesses.

Much of the success for the recent revitalization of the downtown can be linked to our 2030 Vision and Strategic Plan, which for the past four years has clearly outlined the steps that must be taken for downtown to truly become “a destination place to spend the day socializing, shopping and dining.”

Candidly, we are not all the way there yet. But with each year has come progress, as both the previous City Council and this one have been consistent in their support of doing what needs to be done to inject new life into the downtown.

Two exciting projects that lie on the horizon will offer more proof of that.

Rock Creek Homes has obtained a building permit for a 17,000-square foot, three-story building to be constructed at the intersection of Hastings and Main avenues, and is under contract to begin construction by no later than May 7, 2006.

With retail on the ground floor and office settings on levels two and three, this attractive facility will attract more people into the downtown – and by more people, I mean not only customers but employees who will presumably spend time in other downtown businesses.

And on Monday night, the City Council cast a strong vote of support for Dawn Schulberg and her thriving Premiere Dance Academy, approving her request for tax increment financing that will enable her to construct a new two-story, 10,000-square-foot dance studio facility on Colorado Street.

Dawn is a wonderful example of the entrepreneurial spirit that can be found in our downtown area. She and her daughters took a program that was run quite well by the city and made it even better, growing to the point where its student population now exceeds 700! Given that success, it's no surprise that she is thinking expansion. The exciting thing is that she, too, is making a tremendous commitment to the future of downtown Prior Lake.

The dance studio relocation creates another exciting opportunity downtown. The existing dance studio space in the Prior Lake Library/Resource Center is now available for other uses. Should it become a senior center, a daycare, a retail outlet, or some other use beneficial to our downtown? You can share your views on this important topic by visiting the city's Web site, www.cityofpriorlake.com, and its new Your Voice forum section.

And finally construction of the new police station and city hall facilities are going very well. We are optimistic that both facilities will be open before the end of this year.

So that's four new buildings either under construction or about to commence. That's tremendous progress, but unfortunately, it comes with some short-term pain in terms of parking and traffic in the downtown area.

Two years ago, prior to the reconstruction of parts of Main and Dakota, a study commissioned by the city to examine short- and long-term parking needs found that 1,018 parking spaces existed within the primary downtown

study area. That study also revealed the need for 400 to 700 more parking spaces through the full “build-out” of the downtown environment.

As a city, we have begun to address these issues, entering into an agreement with Holy Trinity Methodist Church for the temporary use of some of the stalls in its lot for city hall and police station construction workers, and making plans to relocate our Laker Lines park-and-ride lot from its current 63-lot home on Colorado Street to Shepherd of the Lake Lutheran Church on McKenna Road.

Over time, considerably more parking will be needed to serve businesses north of County Road 21. And as a city, we must look long and hard for creative solutions to these pressing issues, recognizing that the stalls that will be added to serve the police station and city hall will not be enough.

Amid all of this newness and talk of the future, however, comes a reminder of our past. This Sunday, the VFW celebrates 60 glorious years as an organization giving back to the Prior Lake community with a special event starting at 2 p.m. and ending with a program at 4 p.m.

Since 1960, the VFW has been a vital part of downtown Prior Lake, serving as a primary gathering place for socializing, dining and entertainment. And over the years, I'd be hard pressed to name another organization that has done more for Prior Lake than the VFW. I hope you will join me at the VFW on Sunday to pay proper tribute.

From its tradition-rich past to its glorious future, downtown is a special place that, both then and now, makes Prior Lake a wonderful place to call home.