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The Battle of the “Old” Towns

Centerra plans its own "Old" Town

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Centerra's Grand Station takes a page for success from Fort Collins crown jewel
By Greg Campbell

Centerra's grand ambitions to mimic Old Town generate mixed reactions in downtown Fort Collins.

Little more than a year ago, it was jokingly prophesized in the pages of Fort Collins Weekly that Centerra, Loveland's sprawling development of retail shopping, medical offices and residential neighborhoods, would soon reach the stage where it could incorporate as its own municipality.

Last week's announcement that the newest addition to the development would be a mixed use "downtown" area brazenly styled on Fort Collins' iconic Old Town district had few people laughing, however.

After having lost the race to develop a regional lifestyle center to capture millions in sales tax revenues, Fort Collins has fallen back on the identity of its downtown as its primary lure for local and out-of-town spending ... and some see Centerra's planned Grand Station development as yet another shot across our economic bow that could further threaten the city's standing as the gravitational center of Northern Colorado.

"I've been aware that this has been coming for awhile," says Matt Robenalt, a project director for the Downtown Development Authority. "There's a lot of amenities in that project that they proposed that are strikingly familiar. It's not identical (to Old Town) or anything like that, but certainly there's a track record for amenities that they're proposing to be quite successful."

That's certainly the plan from the point of view of McWhinney, the Loveland development company that built Centerra from the ground up. Grand Station is envisioned as a 60-acre, million-square-foot pedestrian playground, complete with a working double-decker streetcar, 400 hotel rooms, 160 residences, 20,000 square feet of conference space and nearly half a million square feet of shopping, dining and entertainment space. Architecturally, it will pay its respects to the sorts of old-styled buildings more common to turn-of-the-century downtowns found from Leadville to ... well, Fort Collins. The development will put a premium on human-scale amenities like grassy knolls, water features, cobbled plazas and loft-style homes with rooftop gardens and dining patios.

It's all part of the greater McWhinney plan to make mixed use developments user-friendly, much in the same way that the Starbucks coffee chain emphasizes the "experience" of lingering in their stores as being just as important as the coffee they sell.

"The purpose of McWhinney is to create great places for people," says Rocky Scott, the president of McWhinney-Centerra. "In that quest, as we look around the country for the best examples of who's doing

that, our strategy is to go out and find the best we can and bring it into Grand Station.”

Scott says the development was created using benchmarks derived from 28 similar projects throughout the country, including those in Columbus, Ohio, and in San Jose, Calif., among other areas. Fort Collins was not one of the 28 areas studied, but that’s not to say it hasn’t influenced Grand Station’s intended vibe; Scott says the only reason Fort Collins wasn’t included in the benchmark study is because “it’s in our back yard and we’re all familiar with it.”

But Scott says the greater purpose of Grand Station isn’t to knock Old Town off its pedestal, just to give it some healthy competition. As the population of Northern Colorado swells along the I-25 corridor, Centerra needed something to set it apart from future developments that could ensure its competitive edge, he says.

“The real issue for us is competitive differentiation,” he says. “If you look at all of the projects planned up and down I-25 (equaling) four million square feet, we have to differentiate our project significantly.”

Fort Collins isn’t unfamiliar with such efforts enhancing and revitalizing downtown to ensure its continued appeal to residents and visitors alike is a constant task, one that is gaining new momentum through the UniverCity Connections initiative. Stakeholders have been meeting for months to brainstorm unique and innovative ideas for how Old Town, the Colorado State University campus and the promise of the Poudre River corridor can dovetail and capitalize on shared opportunities. UniverCity Connections is building on an impressive base of already grounded projects, including the new Penny Flats development, the Discovery Science Center, the potential developments at Oxbow and numerous other initiatives. The DDA is seeing some movement on its Beet Street cultural initiative with the hiring last month of an executive director (see the story on page 20 for details). The City Council election has breathed new life into the Mason Corridor, a so-called “lifestyle corridor” that will connect the north and south parts of the city with bike paths, alternative transportation and boutique-like business and retail development.

And of course, Old Town’s biggest advantage over Grand Station is that it already exists the Centerra project still has a number of hurdles to clear in terms of zoning and permitting before the souvenir shovels make an appearance at a ceremonial groundbreaking. Indeed, last weekend, it was practically impossible to park a car downtown in Fort Collins, and most restaurants had long waits for tables before the sun set.

For those and other reasons, Economic Development Director Mike Freeman bristles at questions of how downtown will compete with Centerra.

“This doesn’t change our economic strategy one iota,” Freeman says. “Frankly, seeing this kind of development ... should be anticipated, these styles of mixed-use projects in areas where you have very large pieces of land to be developed. It’s pretty typical stuff.

“Put it in perspective: it’s three hotels. We’ve had four hotels built on the Harmony Corridor in the past 18 months,” he continues. “Conference space may be of a little concern. That’s something Fort Collins has lacked for a long, long time that creates some competitive advantage for the site. (But) 160 units of residential; well, we have 350-plus happening in downtown right now, plus all of the cultural, scientific, entertainment kind of things that are happening with Beet Street. What I’m saying is that I think it’s really a kind of a different product ultimately.”

Scott agrees, at least somewhat.

“It’s not a zero sum game,” he says. “There’s no way anyone can duplicate the historical significance and the bars around Old Town, there’s just no way. ... Fort Collins has an awful lot going for it and that’s not going to be duplicated anywhere else.”

But that doesn’t mean McWhinney isn’t going to give Fort Collins downtown a run for its money. Despite what he says is McWhinney’s dedication to regional cooperation among municipalities and how different projects simply offer more options to lure more people to the region he admits the goal is to build a Northern Colorado destination that will be second to none, Fort Collins included.

And that has at least some Fort Collins leaders concerned. Both Chip Steiner, the director of the DDA, and Jim Clark, the president and CEO of the Fort Collins Convention & Visitor's bureau, are quoted in the Coloradoan voicing their concern that a new crop of hotel rooms and retail opportunities in Loveland will be challenging for Fort Collins to compete with, at least initially.

But competition is the name of the game, at least as far as McWhinney is concerned.

"The beauty of that is that competition raises all boats, right?" Scott says.

Robenalt of the DDA would likely agree.

"I think the Downtown Business Association and the Downtown Development Authority and everybody really looked introspectively at what they were doing when the Promenade Shops announced at Centerra," he says. "Ever since then, there's been a pretty vigorous effort to keep things looking good and trying new things and keeping them fresh. We've been trying out new programs to keep the cash registers ringing down here."

Still, he says that since Grand Station is liberally borrowing the very Old Town characteristics that have made it successful, the city will have to be on its toes.

"I think it's always good to be vigilant about what's going on in the marketplace and this is one more thing to be watching out for," he says. "We certainly have a successful recipe up here. ... Before I would jump into alarmist mode, from what I understand is that it's still conceptual and that nothing has been submitted.

"It's on our doorstep, but I don't think it's anything that's going to affect us tomorrow."

Freeman goes further than that, however. While he believes there will be some degree of competition between Old Town and Grand Station, he sees them as apples and oranges despite many obvious parallels.

"There's not this competitive thing going on (with Loveland)," he says. "People are really trying to make it appear like that's what's going on, like we're just sitting wringing our hands in the back room and going 'Oh those darn Loveland people, here's what they've done next to try to impact Fort Collins a negative way.'

"The point being, we understand the importance of the downtown from an economic standpoint," he continues. "And we're going to continue to be really savvy about how we try to develop downtown and maintain it as a really important economic underpinning for the city. That does not change one bit however Centerra chooses to evolve. They definitely can compete at some level, but I think there's a pretty big difference at the same time.

"Downtown is still a work in progress," he says.

<http://thevillageatjohnstown.blogspot.com/2007/03/battle-of-old-towns.html>

No breaks for Fort Collins' 'CEO' 12-hour work days, packed schedule are standard

By KEVIN DARST
KevinDarst@coloradoan.com

Fort Collins City Manager Darin Atteberry is a devout man.

Look no further than the time he spends in what's known as the Blackberry prayer, his head bowed briefly as he pulls the black, palm-sized wireless device from the clip on his belt and scans the screen. Atteberry's Blackberry rings, buzzes or vibrates dozens of times during the day, delivering phone calls and e-mails.

It's a Friday in early March, and Atteberry is particularly sensitive to the PDA's chips and hums. His schedule is loaded from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. with meetings - a light day by his estimation - but Alabama-based Bayer Properties also is supposed to close on the land northwest of Harmony and Ziegler roads, where the city has given it permission to build a 910,000-square-foot lifestyle center anchored by Super Target and Lowe's Home Improvement.

The mall is a crucial cog in the city's plan to revive stagnant sales tax collections, and one of the first calls Atteberry gets is to tell him there's a snag at the closing.

For the next six hours, while he sits through meetings about budgeting, employee pay, CSU updates and pothole problems, Atteberry pulls the Blackberry from the holster and returns to it over and over again, stepping into an adjoining room several times to get updates on the closing.

Atteberry joined the city in 1996 as assistant city manager. When then-City Manager John Fischbach left for Washington state in 2004, the City Council gave the job to Atteberry after a national search.

⊕ Zoom Photo



V. Richard Haro/The Coloradoan

Fort Collins City Manager Darin Atteberry, left, takes a phone call during a meeting with Ann Turnquist, policy and projects manager for the City Manager's Office.

⊕ Zoom Photo



V. Richard Haro/The Coloradoan

Darin Atteberry, center, shares a laugh with Janet Miller, left, interim human resources director, and Kelly DiMartino, communications and public involvement director.

Busy man

A look at Darin Atteberry's March 2 schedule, as reprinted from his calendar:

6:45 a.m.-7:30 a.m. — Harmony bus routes

8 a.m.-8:30 a.m. — A. Turnquist re: ICMA performance management

8:30 a.m.-9 a.m. — Prep for presentation to CSU senior scholars and briefing issues and answers (J. Miller/K. DiMartino)

9 a.m.-10 a.m. — Tony Frank re: misc. items

As the city manager, he's essentially the chief executive officer of city government, in charge of 1,200 to 2,300 employees depending on the time of year and a \$477 million budget.

Current council members speak glowingly of Atteberry. He's presided over several tough budget years, though, that have seen job cuts and a reduction in city services, notably Dial-A-Ride, at Atteberry's recommendation.

"When I was the assistant city manager watching John, it looked a lot easier," Atteberry said.

On the Friday in early March, Atteberry drives his sage green Ford Escape hybrid from his southeast Fort Collins home to Intel, where he parks so he can catch a Transfort bus to work. Transfort rolled out a new route in January along the east end of the Harmony corridor, and Atteberry wants to try it.

The bus stop shelter is missing a window pane. "This doesn't say 'world-class community,'" Atteberry says, a reference to the city's mission.

He gets off at the city's transit center on Mason Street and walks to city hall a block away, arriving at 7:30 a.m. His first meeting is at 8 a.m., a 30-minute gig about the city's participation in a national survey that should reveal how Fort Collins stacks up in everything from parks maintenance to police officers.

By noon, he's off to lunch with other leaders in the city who are reading books by author John Kotter on leading change.

Still no resolution on the Bayer front. He points out that he's not always so involved in such projects.

"This one, because of its significance to the community and scale, I was intimately involved in from the beginning of the project," he'll say later.

It's no small feat to get on Atteberry's

10 a.m.-10:30 a.m. — Mike Freeman re: BFO process 2008-09

10:30 a.m.-11 a.m. — Mayor and Darin 1x1

11 a.m.-11:30 a.m. — Becky Hogan re: ICSC briefing

11:30 a.m.-11:45 a.m. — Larry Schneider re: snow budget and pavement status

Noon-1:15 p.m. — Ben Beard: Leadership forum: Leading Change by John Kotter

1:30 p.m.-2:30 p.m. — Rulon Stacey re: misc. items

2:30 p.m.-3 p.m. — Paul Batchelder: IT items

3 p.m.-4 p.m. — Wendy Williams and Greg Jones from Porter Industries re: LEED-NC standards

4 p.m.-5 p.m. — Chip Steiner/Carol Bennis

5 p.m.-6 p.m. — Bus route

Hardest-working public servants

This is the first in a three-part series. The schedule:

Today — Fort Collins City Manager Darin Atteberry.

Monday — Poudre School District Superintendent Jerry Wilson.

Tuesday — Larimer County Manager Frank Lancaster.

schedule, even if you're a peer.

"He's a hard man to get a meeting with," said Don Williams, the city manager in Loveland.

Williams, who started with Loveland in 1986 as its fleet manager and earned his current job five years ago, says he typically works a little more than 40 hours a week and rarely more than 50.

That's not Atteberry's reality. His assistant, Tanny Gilmore, says he consistently works 12-hour days.

Nor is it Roy Otto's reality.

"Closer to 60," said Otto, Greeley's city manager since 2005. "Every Tuesday (when Greeley has City Council meetings) tends to be a long one. It's had the tendency to go into Wednesday."

Lunch is over, and Atteberry's Friday is slipping away when his Blackberry rings. He steps out of his 10th meeting of the day and finally gets good news: The Bayer deal closed.

He seems instantly lighter, more at ease. He rolls through the afternoon and into coffee at 4 p.m. with Downtown Development Authority Executive Director Chip Steiner and Carol Bennis, who's leading the DDA's new Beet Street cultural project.

A couple minutes before 5 p.m., he bolts for the transit center. The bus is empty as he climbs aboard. His day is over, but the weekend won't bring a total respite.

If he doesn't wake up early Saturday to do some work at home, he'll do it Saturday night. On any other night he'll do one to three hours of work at home.

"I try not to work Friday night," Atteberry said.

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