

Dr & D coming areas

Momentum in Southwest Missouri

Springfield, Missouri's downtown has been the recent beneficiary of developers directing millions of dollars into residential, restaurants and sports and convention facilities.

By James Evans

Springfield, Missouri is in the midst of a downtown revival.

Just 10 years ago, many of the city's downtown users packed up and fled the central business district at 5 p.m. for the suburbs. There was little to draw people to the downtown and limited housing opportunities.

"Ten years ago you could purchase real estate for pennies on the dollar and today you are paying premiums," said Greg Williams, senior vice president of economic development for the Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce.

Today, the city has a downtown plan and a strong supporter in John Q. Hammons, the 84-year-old chairman and CEO of John Q. Hammons Hotels Inc., who has and continues to pump millions of dollars into downtown projects. Downtown buildings have been revitalized and the Center City—as the city's downtown is referred to locally—has a healthy number of restaurants, entertainment and retail outlets.

In the coming months, the city will see the completion of a new minor league baseball stadium as well as a convention center. There also are plans for a new indoor sports arena that will host a minor league hockey team and potentially arena football.

The Springfield area's Top 10 employers

1. CoxHealth – 8,600
2. St. John's Health System – 6,500
3. Southwest Missouri State University – 3,189
4. Springfield Public Schools – 3,150
5. Wal-Mart Stores – 2,699
6. U.S. Government – 2,565
7. State of Missouri – 2,213
8. Bass Pro Shops / Tracker Marine – 2,500
9. City of Springfield – 1,500
10. O'Reilly Auto Parts – 1,292

Source: Springfield Business and Development Corp.

The revitalized downtown also has seen a surge in residential development interest. In early July, three developers unveiled their plans for condominiums and apartments, totaling nearly 200 units.

City officials and developers admit there is a captive audience for city center—Southwest Missouri State University and Drury University have a strong presence in the downtown. The region with a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) population of 379,000 people also benefits from its proximity to Branson, Missouri.

"Once [the major projects] all come to fruition, it will be a pretty vibrant downtown," says Jeffrey Wells, CEO of architecture and engineering firm Pellham Phillips Hackerman, which is proposing a downtown condominium project. "Everything had moved to the suburbs. Now, all the real estate is starting to appreciate. It has taken a lot of effort."

Play ball |

Next spring, professional baseball will begin anew in Springfield—the first time professional ballplayers have taken the field in the Ozark community since the 1930s. The St. Louis Cardinals had an affiliate minor league team back then that called Springfield home, says Hammons. He says he saw Sandy Koufax and Stan Musial play in Springfield before they were called up to the big leagues.

Hammons says he is spending approximately \$30 million of his own money to bring baseball back to the community. City leaders have been working for the past decade to get a team as they, as well as Hammons, have recognized that a market exists for professional sports.

"I searched all over the U.S. and there is not another city this size that doesn't have a professional sports team," Hammons says. "Our population is equated with sports. We have always been a hot bed for basketball. That is why I built the Missouri Sports Hall of Fame [in Springfield]."

In August 2002, Killian Construction began work on Hammons Field, an 8,000-seat stadium right east of downtown Springfield on the corner of John Q. Hammons Parkway and Traffic Way. Hammons says an AA affiliate ball club will play at the park; he has not announced what major league team's farm club will play at the park. The Southwest Missouri State baseball team also will use the stadium as its home diamond.

In the future, Hammons also has plans to build a 110-room Holiday Inn Express adjacent to the stadium.

Baseball may not be the only professional sporting event available during the next years in Springfield. Hammons, the city and Drury University are working together to build a professional indoor sports arena. It would be the home of a minor league hockey team and the home court of Drury's basketball team.

The city has proposed a 5,200- to 7,000-seat arena, but the final decision on the size of the arena has not been made. Hammons says that the proposed arena is still about a year away before construction begins on the project. Financing for the project has not been finalized.



(Top) In September, the Springfield Exposition Center will open. A new 45,000 square foot convention center will be linked to the existing 50,000 square foot University Plaza Trade Center. (Bottom) Professional baseball will return to Springfield in 2004 when the 8,000-seat Hammons Field opens its doors and a AA ball team takes the field.

Attracting the Airstream crowd |

Another step in the downtown's development is a new 45,000 square foot convention center that will be linked with the existing 50,000 square foot University Plaza Trade Center.

State and local funds will pay for the nearly \$15 million Springfield Exposition Center. It will be completed in September.

"Prior to the construction of this, we did not have a municipally owned convention center," said Tracy Kimberlin, executive director of the Springfield Convention and Visitor's Bureau. "The existing trade facility used to be a Sears department store and it had a limited use. The new center will allow us to draw larger users than in the past."

One of the first bookings for the convention center was the 50th Anniversary get together in 2005 for the Wally Byam Caravan Club. As many as 5,000 people will attend the event in 2005 to celebrate Airstream Inc.'s trailers and motorhomes.

The existing University Plaza Trade Center is being remodeled and John Q. Hammons Hotels will manage the convention center—which sits across the street from University Plaza Hotel.

To accommodate the baseball park, convention center and potential sports arena, a 977-space parking garage is being constructed at 815 East St. Louis Street, a location

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within a few blocks of each facility.

The ballpark, expo center and proposed arena all sit within an area referred to as Jordan Valley Park. It is a 300-acre space near the downtown that includes a traditional park with green space as well as an \$8.5 million municipal ice rink facility.

Housing projects proposed |

Last month, three housing proposals were unveiled for the downtown. Wells at Pellham Phillips Hackerman is proposing to develop 34, three-story townhomes on the west side of the downtown at Market Avenue and College Street.

Wells says the units will cost between \$150,000 and \$200,000 and provide between 1,400 to 3,000 square feet of living space. He hopes to get the necessary approvals by September.

Wells says he has seen a healthy interest in his loft-style units and his proposed development sits near a popular downtown attraction—the Springfield Brewing Co.

Another local developer, Tillman Redevelopment LLC, wants to construct 52-apartment units, with rents that start at \$325 a month. His plan, as well, is targeted at Market Avenue and College Street.

The third project, from Miller and Miller, calls for two apartment complexes with as many as 100 units on College Street. The one- and two-bedroom units would cost between \$400 and \$600 a month.

Looking forward |

Another project on the downtown radar screen is a proposed six-story, 180,000 square foot, Class A office building next door to Springfield City Hall. Bill Jester of Springfield-based Resource Development Inc. has proposed the \$20 million project at Central Street and Jefferson Avenue.

A 700-space parking deck is also part of the office building development. As of early July, Resource Development was working to line up financing and tenants for the proposed building.

The healthy list of projects is only encouraging more development possibilities, says Williams with the Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce.

“When developers see other developers taking a risk—it just snowballs,” he said. “It could be on this course for the next three, four, five years. It could be a continued resurgence for an area that has largely been ignored in the past decade.” **MWREN**

Growing in Grand Island

Nebraska’s fourth largest community is set to crank up its economic development efforts.

By James Evans

When Cindy Johnson thinks of what Grand Island, Nebraska can offer companies, she thinks of residents with a strong work ethic, the community’s central location and good schools.

“These folks work hard,” says Johnson, president of the Grand Island Area Chamber of Commerce. “I can say that with such confidence. That is the No. 1 benefit for employers.”

Indeed, the largely blue-collar central Nebraska community—located about 150 miles west of Omaha—with a population of nearly 43,000 residents is about to embark

on a new initiative to draw jobs, companies and development to Grand Island.

Local voters in early May overwhelmingly approved setting aside \$750,000 of city funds each year for the next 10 years to dedicate to economic development. It more than doubled what the city previously had set aside annually for economic development.

Just two years ago, a similar measure put before Grand Island voters failed to win approval by a narrow margin, Johnson said. Education efforts have been needed in the community to emphasize a coordinated economic development effort, she says.

“Unless people can feel that it can touch them personally, it’s hard to sell,” Johnson says.

Johnson says a unified effort is even more crucial currently as the pool of economic development “wins,” such as luring a corporation or a new plant to a community, is not getting any larger.

Beginning in September, The Grand Island Area Economic Development Corp. will take the lead on identifying possible targets to woo to the city, which sits at the intersection of Interstate 80 and highways 30 and 281. Current City Administrator Marlan Ferguson will serve as the non-profit’s president and CEO.