

Downtown Plano 3.0: Looking back and driving forward

BY BRIT MOTT

TODAY, PLANO IS A BOOMING CITY OF COMMERCE. What does this mean for downtown? Recently named a 2015 Great Place in America by the American Planning Association, Downtown Plano is not only keeping up with economic stimulation and residential growth, but it has an advantage. Its inherent historical value and diversity, combined with forward-thinking planners within the City of Plano, have positioned this pocket community to be at the forefront of innovation. Welcome, Downtown Plano 3.0!

In the last 32 years, Frank Turner, Deputy City Manager for the City of Plano, has

been a vital link in the planning and modernization of downtown. He joined the City as Planning Director in 1984, so he's been here since the beginning—well, since Plano 1.0. Frank retired on February 29, closing out a stellar 41-year municipal career, but before he bid farewell, we sat down with him to reminisce.

Once upon a time, Downtown Plano was...

Frank sits back in his chair and his thoughts drift to the 1970s. "Up until the '70s, Downtown Plano was a viable district," he says. "You had Western Auto, a clothing store, a furniture store, a drugstore—a lot of goods and services were in

downtown. By the '80s, that had diminished significantly. You still had a pharmacy and a furniture store, but most retail operations moved out of downtown to strip centers. That erosion of commercial activity continued to accelerate and you pretty much had absentee ownership. It was a bad period of economic disinvestment for downtown, even for the surrounding neighborhoods."

He continues, "But in 1992, the City initiated a Downtown Development Plan that changed the zoning to permit mixed-use development. At first, there wasn't much of a reaction from developers or new businesses," he recalls. "The rebirth didn't happen until DART."



Plano 1.0 was the Plano of the '80s: The population was 80,000 and most working residents commuted to Dallas.

Plano 2.0 was the Plano of the '90s: The population doubled and EDS (now Hewlett Packard) and JCPenney made their headquarters here.

Plano 3.0, touted by Mayor Harry LaRosiliere, is "a city of today that is prepared for the future as we comfortably compete for any business and resident on the global stage." Plano is home to roughly 275,000 residents, several Fortune 1,000 companies, and more than 10,000 businesses.



A resurgence in history

The railroad came to Plano in 1872 creating business opportunities in the agricultural community and serving as a mail stop and stage route between McKinney and Dallas. The Texas Electric Railway opened Plano's first commuter rail service in 1908 with trolleys running hourly from Denison to Dallas. Service continued from the Interurban Station until 1948.

In the '90s, DART (Dallas Area Rapid Transit) decided to locate a station in Downtown Plano as it planned the Red Line route. DART rail service opened in 2002. "Reinvesting in downtown started to make sense," says Frank. "Jörg and Cathy Fercher bought the old McCall Insurance building and turned it into Jörg's Cafe Vienna. They were a great success. Then, Tim Kelly opened Kelly's Eastside, and ever since, a lot of restaurants have moved here. Downtown Plano has become an active place in the evenings."

Mass transportation served as a catalyst for growth in Downtown Plano. Its emergence was also a "psychological boost," notes Frank, because the once sleepy, farming community became a hub of activity.

More importantly, he states, "DART protected Downtown Plano. It could have been lost and forgotten, but DART put it back on the map. It gave downtown a more significant place in geography. One thousand people on any weekday ride it from Downtown Plano, and several thousand ride past it every day. Larger surrounding regions know Downtown Plano because of DART."

Making way for residents

A year in advance of DART's opening, the mixed-use residential development, Eastside Village, saw the completion of its first phase and the groundbreaking of phase two. Formerly the site of a farm equipment sales operation built in the late '70s, it burned down and a Spanish-style shopping center was built in its place. Frank described it as out of place and not in keeping with the downtown area, so, the City purchased the shopping center for future parking. However, with DART's planned rail station location next to the property, the City decided that there was a better use for the property and partnered with Robert Shaw for the development of Eastside Village I. Mr. Shaw was

so optimistic about his first project, half-way through, he decided to build a second phase. Frank calls Eastside Village I and II "a great success."

Today, there are more than 1,000 residential units (homes, apartments and townhomes) within a quarter-mile of the DART station. And because Downtown Plano has a minimum multi-family residential density of 40 units per acre, it is a pedestrian-friendly urban environment. Frank notes, "Downtown Plano has the greatest extent of diversity, meaning you can go to the theater or a restaurant; you can get your hair done or purchase insurance; you can bank; you can go buy vegetables at the farmers market; you can go to the butcher shop for meat—all at a walking distance."

Haggard Park and adjoining communities

Not to be forgotten is Haggard Park. A respite in the heart of a mixed-use district and a ceremonial hosting grounds for festivals, art shows and concerts, the park was donated to the City in 1928 by Emma Bishop in honor of her parents C.S. and N.K. Haggard. The original tract of land donated for the park was smaller than



the park is today. Since the '80s, the City has purchased additional property and the park has undergone a few facelifts, including the addition of a gazebo and fountain.

The Haggard Park neighborhood, the Douglass Community and Old Towne are cornerstones for Downtown Plano's cultural flair, and they all share the stage with centuries-old architecture. Historic homes set Downtown Plano apart from other parts of the city and other downtowns across the DFW Metroplex. Says Frank, "Downtown Plano is organic. It's a result of individuals' investments, rather than a mass-developed project." He adds, "It's constantly evolving. No one is trying to hold it rigid. Merchants come and go, new ideas come in, and the economic success continues."

The future of Downtown Plano

Mass transportation, residential living and an 80-acre collection of shops, restaurants and arts venues appeal to singles, families, business owners and retirees—the whole gamut. "When people ask, 'What are we going to do tonight?' They say, 'Let's go to Downtown Plano.' They don't say a specific shopping center or restaurant," notes Frank.

The sense of community runs deep, and that's largely due to the Historic Downtown Plano Association (HDPA). Alex Hargis took the helm as Executive Director of this nonprofit in January. Together, with the City of Plano, they are a united front aiding in the revitalization of downtown, and one of their areas of focus is the arts.

Last year, Plano City Council declared Downtown Plano an arts district because of the wealth of venues that entertain residents and visitors, alike: The Courtyard Theater; the Art Association of Plano; the Cox Building Playhouse; McCall Plaza; and the Saigling House, which is being renovated to become the home of the ArtCentre of Plano. The latest arts venue, Ten 20 Gallery, recently opened thanks to the efforts of Jeff Bergus of Lockhart Smokehouse, Jörg Fercher from Jörg's Cafe Vienna, Ken Wesley with Supreme Dream Photography, and building owner Rutledge Haggard.

The man steering the ship

The arts scene is in Alex's blood. A graduate of Collin College and hall of fame member of its award-winning theater program, Alex began working with the City of Plano as a technician for Plano Stages. Before long, he was the patron services

manager overseeing the guest experience for the historic Courtyard Theater, Cox Building Playhouse and the Amphitheater at Oak Point Park.

That was over 10 years ago. Most recently, Alex was the Assistant Director of Events for the AT&T Performing Arts Center where he oversaw the operations of nearly 900 events a year, including the Aurora festival in the Dallas Arts District.

"This is a homecoming for me," he tells *Plano Profile* over lunch one day. "My wife and I held our wedding reception at the Courtyard Theater. When I worked for the City of Plano 10 years ago, I remember walking down 15th Street to the magic shop with friends and seeing the stained glass on this building [the Fillmore Pub] and I said to my friend Jason, 'This needs to be a pub.' Sure enough, it's a pub. I'm still waiting for my royalty check," he jokes.



Alex will be working with merchants, City officials and local arts groups to develop Plano's newly established arts district. "My role is to be the liaison between the merchants and the City of Plano. If they say, 'We want the street lamps cleaned' or if they have concerns about the construction going on, I'm here to give them updates. I'm also here to provide marketing exposure for Downtown Plano, help them produce their events, and lay the groundwork to attract more artists to downtown."

Mixing the old with the new

At the HDPA's February monthly meeting, Alex stood at the front of the room at event 1013 and practically shouted, "2016 is going to be a *big, big* year!"

No doubt, with that enthusiasm! "From urban development and community engagement with a revived retail

and dining scene, new building construction and district-wide events, Downtown Plano has a distinctive thumbprint, which is rooted in our heritage and culture," he says. "An arts component can propel us forward. Art is not stagnant; it's always progressive. It carries you into the future and causes you to change for the better." He pauses. "It's a great dichotomy that we have here in downtown. No other neighborhood in Plano can say they have that push-pull thing going on."

Certainly, it will be a balancing act mixing the old with the new. "We have a town that's rooted in its heritage and has to maintain a certain look, but at the same time, we have an arts district that's intuitive, and we have to loosen the button a little bit. An arts scene will offer a new identity for Downtown Plano. It will create a mixture of that small, quaint downtown feel with an artistic boldness. Mixing the two—that's the sweet spot we're looking for."

Retaining loyalty

Art, music, dance, theater, photography classes, social events, gallery exhibits, jazz and dance festivals—Downtown Plano has the potential to serve arts patrons of all ages. Alex's goal is to attract the masses and then keep them here. "If we don't give them experiences that go in the photo books of their living rooms, they're not going to stay here."

The HDPA will rely on pulse-programming, or year-round events and attractions including the annual Steinfest, Plano International Festival and Dickens in Historic Downtown Plano. Last year, HDPA hosted Night Out on 15th. It was like the parting of the Red Sea along downtown's red brick road, as organizers set up an extra-long table and guests enjoyed a fine dining experience. This year's Night Out on 15th is Sunday, May 22.

Other revitalization items include improving parking—even implementing valet parking—and introducing food trucks to the downtown scene. Innovation is boundless when you have such motivated, passionate leaders working together.

Says Alex, "Everybody has the same objective: to improve Downtown Plano and give it a viable future." 📍

If you'd like to support the HDPA, their annual poker tournament, Chips, is Friday, March 25. Check out the details on Calendar, page 64. You can also follow HDPA on Instagram @downtownplano.