

*From Talk Business & Politics*

# Bentonville, Rogers Begin to See Returns on Downtown Investments Around Quality of Life

Rose Ann Pearce | May 17, 2016

City officials in Bentonville and Rogers have one thing in common – a drive to make their downtown areas destinations and places to live, work and play. The cities have invested in comprehensive downtown master plans and continue to use public dollars to encourage private sector investment.

Such investments are paying off.

A recent survey by the Walton Family Foundation found that one in three regional residents are spending more time downtown. The use of farmers markets, seeking entertainment and downtown dining was higher for wealthier residents, but the use of downtowns for other purposes did not differ

by income category. The Walton Family Foundation findings indicate that Northwest Arkansas residents generally feel safe in downtown areas, with 96% reporting feeling safe during the day and 83% reporting feeling safe after dark.



*A section of downtown Bentonville.*

Those out and about between 5:30 and 6:30 a.m. will likely find a crew of city workers cleaning around the Bentonville square. Cleanliness ranks high on Mayor Bob McCaslin's list of key points when talking about quality of life. He says the city's role is to create an atmosphere or environment that makes the private sector want to invest in the downtown.

That's proven to be true in recent years as downtown Bentonville has exploded with new shops, restaurants and other businesses, including the recent opening of a Walmart Neighborhood Markets, just steps off the square.

"The Public Works and Parks departments keep the downtown and the whole city in pristine condition," McCaslin said. "We want the city to look good and to give more than what people expect."

He also thinks the cleanliness of the square and the city as well as safe parks creates the "wholesome atmosphere" for which Bentonville has come to be known. In 2007, residents approved a \$110 million bond issue by a 78% margin, McCaslin said. Of that, parks received \$15 million; streets, \$85 million; police and fire, \$4.75 million each. The municipal airport also received a portion of the bond proceeds.

That bond issue has gone a long way in fulfilling what McCaslin has called the city's responsibility of creating an environment that has contributed to the business boom and population growth the city has experienced in recent years. A nationally recognized art museum, a children's museum, the nation's largest retailer and the Razorback Greenway certainly haven't hurt in changing the image of the city to that of a destination city.

"For most people visiting an area, the first barometer is the downtown area," McCaslin said. "Our goal is to make Bentonville the best downtown you could find anywhere."

## CREATING THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT

The one challenge McCaslin identified was that of capacity.

"If we do have gaps, it's a private sector issue," he said. "Ours is to create an environment for the private sector to thrive."

That's exactly what has transpired in recent years since the city in December 2014 unveiled a redevelopment plan that created two distinct districts – Arts and Market – that encompassed an 18-acre area southwest from the town square. The city spent \$17,500 on the plan and within 18 months, several million dollars of private funds began pouring into the Arts District and Market Districts carved out in downtown.

ERC's Thrive became home for dozens of people in the residential development's 62 units. Several new businesses such as Bike Rack Brewery and Pedlar's Pub are located in the Art's District. First National Bank of NWA is in the midst of building a new 8,700-square-foot bank branch in the Art's District that will feature various art displays curated by local artist Zeek Taylor.

In the Market District, the Ice House has been renovated into mixed-used space and Blue Fresh Fish Market and restaurant has opened on 5th Street. Bentonville Brewing Co. and its tap room is also an emerging business in that area. In recent weeks a new movie theater has been announced downtown along with a new event center and the former Kraft Cheese plant is being renovated into a performing arts center and satellite campus for Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

#### ROGERS REINVIGORATED

Connectivity is a key element in the quality of life in downtown Rogers. It can be defined as “neighbors being able to walk to shops, restaurants and amenities in our rapidly growing downtown district,” said Ben Cline, the city's new public relations director.

“It's about having events where people can spend their evenings, just a short walk from home,” he added.

Rogers has made a huge commitment to the downtown area, starting with a modern bike park in November and, more recently, held a ribbon cutting on one of the first year-round Farmer's Markets in the region. The city spent about \$450,000 last year on a master economic development plan to guide downtown growth in the future. The centerpiece of the downtown area is nearby Lake Atalanta, which is only months away from a \$5 million revitalization of the Lake Atalanta Park.

“This multi-million dollar project will open miles of new bike trails, fishing piers and parks that generations of families will enjoy,” Cline said.

All of the amenities are located downtown, and show the city's commitment to the area, he added. Other recent developments in the downtown area have spurred interest in further downtown development. A new Walmart Neighborhood Market opened last year on the southwest corner of Walnut and Eighth streets.

Another project that has drawn considerable interest was the purchase of the old Lane Hotel last year. The buyers are closely associated with the Walton Family Foundation. Details of the purchase and future use have not been publicly discussed but speculation is that the building will become a charter or private school. Once called “the palace of the Ozarks,” the hotel has hosted famous Americans in its heyday, including aviator Amelia Earhart, boxer Jack Dempsey and actor Errol Flynn, according to the building's history.

#### PRIVATE SECTOR MOVES

Another major development has been the city's purchase of the former Morning News building on West Second Street that will allow expansion of the Rogers Historical Museum.

“It's vitally important to bring these improvements to downtown,” Cline said. “These additions will attract new families to Rogers, and keep the area growing and thriving for years to come.”

Aside from city investments, Mercy opened a health clinic in downtown Rogers in late 2014. Mayor Greg Hines said the Mercy Clinic is major anchor for the downtown area and is part of the city's plan to redevelop the neighborhood just north of the brick street district.

Harp's Foods invested in that area several years ago, Casey General Store followed and the Mercy Clinic site is adjacent to those businesses. Hines said the city needs to do more infrastructure work in the immediate area north of downtown. He said the city could partner with businesses who plan new or redevelopments to get this done.

“As we continue to grow, it is vitally important for the success of Rogers as a sustainable community to have a strong and vibrant and downtown. One that allows folks to not only work downtown but to live downtown. This is key to attract

the new people who are coming to Rogers and wanting to live downtown,” Hines said.

Walmart also located a Neighborhood Market Grocery and fueling station to accommodate those residents living in and near downtown Rogers. In a 2014 community assessment report compiled for the city one of the more common topics discussed was a need for more entertainment, nightlife, housing and redevelopment for the Rogers’ downtown area.

Since then city officials are pleased with the private investment they are seeing with restaurants and pubs offering live music to increase the entertainment value in downtown Rogers. Hines recently said the one thing still lacking in downtown is residential density although the city routinely fields calls and conducts visits for investors from inside and outside of Northwest Arkansas.