



Going cosmopolitan

Mainstream, small town USA mix nicely
in downtown retail makeup

Story and Photography by Ken Levy

Blending the brand new with the old-fashioned, downtown Boise continues to morph into a prime destination point for local and national retailers and the growing number of visitors they serve.

The burgeoning downtown area has enjoyed tremendous growth over the past decade, with the addition of the BoDo development, Capital City Public Market, the redevelopment of the Basque Block, new hotels, sidewalk cafés and additional parking, according to Kären Sander, executive director of the Downtown Boise Association.

National restaurant retailers, such as P.F. Chang's China Bistro, Proto's Pizza, Junga Juice, Old Spaghetti Factory and many others, "have brought awareness to downtown Boise through their national marketing campaigns or their widespread popularity," Sander said, noting that nearby small businesses, which may not have the marketing rev-

enues, still benefit from the additional foot traffic despite the competition.

"People who may not have visited downtown Boise before now have an awareness of all the retail options available once they have had an opportunity to explore what downtown has to offer," she said.

The downtown area still retains its unique flavor, with cultural and small-town amenities such as the Esther Simplot Performing Arts Academy, Fulton Street Theatre, Anne Frank Memorial, and the Discovery Center all drawing visitors and, by extension, potential shoppers.

Still, the addition of larger retailers such as Ann Taylor Loft, Office Depot and Urban Outfitters is reshaping downtown into a more cosmopolitan atmosphere.

"It is a balancing act," said Sander. "We need storefronts filled and the added foot traffic, and yet we need to



maintain our unique character and protect local businesses. Our hope is that our local retailers remain strong and provide that balance along with all the new national retailers."

David Graves, manager of the Alexander Davis Men's Store at 812 W. Bannock St., agrees with that concept.

"Downtown must have a balance between specialty operations and larger businesses to co-exist," he said. "We need a commitment for professional services such as accountants, lawyers and doctors. The mix of professional services is necessary to complete the economic stability the downtown core has to offer."

Terrie Robinson, who owns Boise Blue Art Supply with sister Janet Hackett, has seen many changes since she first worked the store in 1970.

"I see a lot of influence from farmers markets on Saturdays, and a lot more out-of-town people" coming downtown, Robinson said.

Joe Koehler, manager of McU Sports, agrees.

"The growth downtown has been a good thing for us, especially when there are farmers' markets. Then there's a huge influx of

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people," he said.

Adding to downtown's draw is the expansion of programs offered at the refurbished Egyptian Theater, according to Robinson.

"They've opened up that remarkable building to concerts and lectures" as well as movies, she said.

The growth and popularity of downtown means more people coming downtown and "more opportunity to sell product," Koehler said.

"The opportunities with downtown growth allow us the opportunity to contribute to this city's local charm and histo-

ry," said Graves.

Robinson said she's always been an advocate of downtown, whether it's shopping, eating or playing.

She's somewhat concerned about rising rents and vacant shops downtown, but she's pleased that many of the owners or property managers allow at least temporary displays of art from such local groups as the Gypsy Gallery and the Idaho Photographic Workshop, while waiting for permanent tenants.

Permanent tenants now include a growing influx of those choosing to call downtown home. New and refurbished residential units such as Boise Place, The Aspen, Royal Plaza, Capital Terrace Apartments and the Gem Noble Building accommodate urban dwellers, with more units still to come.

"Twenty years ago I would not have thought that people would like to live downtown," Graves said. "With the growth that has occurred in recent years, it has become the fashionable thing to do."

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