

SPRINGFIELD NEWS-SUN



Downtown Springfield making dramatic comeback

The tide of migration to Springfield's center seems irreversible.

By [Andrew McGinn](#), Staff Writer

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SPRINGFIELD — For 83 years, the 5-ton Madonna of the Trail statue has honored the tenacity of those pioneers who pushed west — to pursue a better life just beyond the horizon.

Not surprisingly, until this week, the statue could be found near the western-most boundary of Springfield.

On Wednesday, the statue moved east, to the site of what will be a new downtown park, as if to suggest the next great frontier is actually the one we once left behind for greener pastures.

Downtown revitalization has been discussed locally for more than 35 years, when voters in the mid-1970s approved a tax hike to fund present-day City Hall.

But only now, like the sight of covered wagons two centuries ago on the National Road, the tide of migration to the city's center finally seems irreversible.

“There's more going on now downtown than at anytime since I moved to Springfield in 1977,” said Mayor Warren Copeland.

“There's a sense that there's some momentum.”

The list of new projects downtown already completed, nearing completion or about to begin has been well-documented.

But lumped together, it's almost enough to make a believer out of the toughest skeptic.

- Overlooking Buck Creek, the \$235 million, 475,000-square-foot Springfield Regional Medical Center will open Nov. 13.

North Street was rerouted this summer to accommodate the major new hospital.

- Ohio Valley Medical Center, a 46,000-square-foot, short-stay surgical hospital, opened in 2009 on West Main Street.

A three-story medical office building now is being constructed on its campus.

- Clark State Community College's \$5.6 million, 27,000-square-foot Hollenbeck Bayley Creative Arts and Conference Center was unveiled in August on South Limestone Street with space for conventions and classrooms.

- The Bushnell Building, a landmark of Richardsonian Romanesque architecture from 1893 on East Main Street, is undergoing a \$10 million renovation in part to suit the needs of HBC CodeBlue, a water mitigation company, and its 300 employees.
- National Road Commons, the \$2.5 million downtown green space bounded by Columbia, Main and Fisher streets, is the Madonna statue's new home. The Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce's Community Improvement Corp. developed the park.

A dedication ceremony is planned for 11:30 a.m. Oct. 7, with a concert that evening.

- Commons Overlook, a proposed 60,000-square-foot office and retail complex at West Main and Center streets, is seeking its last tenant before proceeding with construction plans.
- Parts of Buck Creek has been transformed into a whitewater park for water sports.
- A 44,320-square-foot ice arena soon will go where Memorial Hall once stood.

"If there's such a thing as being on the tippy tip of the tipping point, that's where we're at," said Maureen Fagans, executive director of the Center City Association. "We've had a real increase in interest in downtown space."

Created in 1998 to champion the revitalization of downtown Springfield, Center City spent its first two years as a volunteer group.

"It's sometimes easy for people to get frustrated or cynical about the process," said Fagans, who took the organization's helm during the throes of the recession in spring 2009.

A number of years separates the 1979 dedication of City Hall and the 1993 construction of the \$15.2 million Clark State Performing Arts Center.

But notable downtown projects have included a new public library and YMCA in 1989, the then-Springfield Inn (now Courtyard by Marriott) in 1990 and the Springfield Regional Cancer Center in 2004.

"We get so familiar with what we've always looked at that we miss the changes," Fagans said.

"The changes are incremental. Sometimes, they're big and beautiful and hard to miss, but other times, it's paving a street or planting a tree."

But for someone like Copeland, a professor of religion at Wittenberg University since 1977, even slow change is good.

"When I interviewed for the job at Wittenberg," he said, "the core block had just been leveled and there was a big hole in the ground."

Now the site of City Hall and the shiny Credit Life Tower, the core block once served as Springfield's retail mecca, a densely packed block of more than 100 different stores.

At one point, there were 14 shoe stores downtown.

As of 1955, by local historian Dick Hatfield's count, there were 11 tailors downtown.

"It's just flat-gone," said Hatfield, well-known from his days on local radio. "Even if they put the streets back to two-way, what the hell is there to go see?"

And the wrecking ball still isn't finished.

Yet another generations-old downtown building is facing demolition.

Built in 1917, the Arcue Building at 6 W. High St. is under contract to be sold, then expected to be razed in January for undetermined future development.

Best known until 1972 as the home of the Hub, a men's clothing store, the Springfield Preservation Alliance has called the demolition plans a step backward, especially for a building in good shape.

While it appears that downtown is being reimagined as one big doctor's office, Center City still envisions a retail district as well, Fagans said.

"I see an area that is absolutely, positively developing as a medical services area," she said, "but I don't see it throughout the downtown."

Some people, she said, are skeptical because they remember how downtown used to look.

"They're not convinced we can get that back," she said. "The reality is, that's not something we're working toward.

"What people miss is being able to come down here and interact with their neighbors."

For Hatfield, Holiday in the City — the seasonal event that continually draws thousands downtown — has become an annual highlight.

"It kind of reminds you of back then," he said.

Fagans is quick to note that downtown had a gradual slide.

Frankly, downtown took its share of kidney punches before hitting the canvas.

The Crowell-Collier Publishing Co., located smack-dab downtown, infamously terminated all 2,000 employees five days before Christmas in 1956.

Also, Catholic Central High School moved farther to the east and North High School was built, Hatfield noted.

As a result, hordes of teens who had gathered daily after school to "beat the block" were no longer close enough to flock downtown.

"As 1960, 1961 and 1962 came about, I started noticing there were parking spaces downtown, which was unusual," Hatfield joked.

Then came the knockout punch — the Upper Valley Mall opened in 1971.

"What happened in Springfield," Copeland said, "happened just about everywhere else."

It's unlikely, he said, that downtowns will ever become major retail centers again, citing the failure of Columbus' City Center Mall, which lasted from 1989 until its demolition in 2009.

But a city's downtown simply can't be ignored, according to Copeland.

"There is a sense of either pride or lack of pride when your downtown has deteriorated," he said. "It either becomes a rallying point or a serious downer."

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