

Fort Worth's downtown buzzing, leader says



TARRANT/ DENTON BUZZ

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Downtown Fort Worth might be winning its war on grackles, but nobody else is staying away.

The central business district — with just 4% Class A office vacancy, 1 million square feet of office space in the pipeline, a burgeoning convention business and increased residential construction — has turned a crucial corner, says the area advocacy group's president, Andy Taft.

"Twenty five years ago, when Downtown Fort Worth Inc. was created, people thought of downtown Fort Worth as a messy, dirty and unsafe place," Taft said in a recent speech to Vision Fort Worth, the young professional contingent of the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce.

Over that time, through use of special districts, city funds and private investment, Taft said leaders are close to reaching goals for total city interconnectivity with a strong theme, story and vision.

Taft said ongoing development just outside the CBD is evidence of a "downtown that is running on all cylinders." He also pointed to projects such as the ongoing Lancaster Avenue redevelopment on downtown's southern edge, the flurry of hotel redos following Omni Hotel's announcement of plans to build downtown and studies showing more demand for downtown condos and apartments as signs that the district is arriving.

Meanwhile Downtown Fort Worth Inc. is still trying to address the area's noticeable weaknesses — a lack of soft goods retailers such as clothiers. "Most of what we do have is in Sundance Square," Taft said.

Taft said he thinks tourist and convention traffic generated by the Omni and more downtown addresses will heighten retail demand, and developers will eventually answer the call.

More buzz

■ CCI/Spencer has bought 19.5 acres at the northeast quadrant of Loop 288 and Spencer Road in Denton with plans to develop a senior living facility. The seller was Denton Spencer. John St. Clair of Henry S. Miller handled the transaction.

■ Tech Fort Worth's eGrips, a maker of adhesive gripping material for small electronics such as cellphones and PDAs, followed up its campaign for the Fiesta Bowl with one for the Yomiuri Giants, a Tokyo baseball team. Customers such as the Giants use the slip-proof material to advertise their logo and mascot.

■ Life Time Fitness is building a new \$16 million fitness center on nearly 12 acres at the corner of Matlock Road and Debbie Lane in Mansfield. The 129,155-square-foot center will house Life Time's "four-in-one" concept that brings together sports and athletics, professional fitness, family recreation and a resort and spa. The Mansfield Economic Development Corp. and the city contributed \$286,000 for infrastructure. The gym will bring 250 jobs to Mansfield.