Downtowns find they have the ‘cool’ factor

Placemaking is all the rage as companies, workers gravitate to locations that offer more than cubicle space

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Dexter is appealing for its walkable and increasingly evolving downtown, a top-tier public school system and bedroom community proximity to all of the amenities of Ann Arbor.
Last year, the second-generation owner of a national archeological firm founded in Jackson 30 years ago that does site surveys for large infrastructure and construction projects moved his company's headquarters 30 miles east to two Victorian homes in downtown Dexter. It was purely a decision driven by a shortage of highly specialized workers with advanced degrees in archeology, anthropology and historic architecture, said Andy Weir, president of Commonwealth Heritage Group, the firm his father founded in 1988.

"We started having some real trouble attracting talent to our Jackson office, especially in mid-to-senior management," Weir said. "Jackson was just kind of lacking. There wasn't a very vibrant downtown. There wasn't very good public transportation. The school system wasn't great. There wasn't a university nearby, which in our industry is a big thing."

In Dexter, Weir found a walkable and increasingly evolving downtown, a top-tier public school system and bedroom community proximity to all of the amenities of Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan — without Ann Arbor real estate prices.

Weir also was able to use the new 16-employee headquarters in Dexter to recruit Brandon Gabler to be his vice president of operations and run the Dexter office and other talent who wanted to live in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti.

Gabler, who lives in Canton Township, had declined two years of persistent job offers from Weir because he didn't want to commute 55 miles west to Jackson — and didn't want to move his family out of the top-rated Plymouth-Canton school district.

"I love being where I can walk to any number of good little restaurants — they're not chains, they're not just trying to bring a penny in," Gabler said. "It actually feels like a community down here."

In other words, downtown Dexter is cool — a major change of working scenery compared to Gabler's previous working environment in the Ann Arbor office of the national engineering firm HDR Inc. in the Avis Farms office complex.

"It was this 1970s or '80s monstrosity of a building with a hundred engineers and me," Gabler said of his former employer's office space. "It was very different."
Now, Gabler oversees archeological projects from a lab in a former carriage house in the heart of a rapidly changing downtown Dexter that’s adopted policies aimed at building greater housing, retail and office space density to meet 21st century worker demands within the confines of a town that was platted three decades before the Civil War.

Placemaking is all the rage in economic development these days as companies and talented workers are navigating to locations that offer more than cubicle space. It’s a topic of near-constant discussion in business circles, including at the Detroit Regional Chamber’s Detroit Policy Conference last week.

In many ways, the conversation around placemaking began in earnest 15 years ago when then-Gov. Jennifer Granholm introduced her "Cool Cities" initiative, said Jeffrey Padden, chairman of the board at Public Policy Associates, a Lansing consulting firm.

"(Cool Cities) was ahead of its time in that it was built around the beginning of the body of research that says this makes sense, this is important, you have to do this to have a successful economy," Padden said. "What’s changed is the business community now understands that and it’s broadly accepted across the political spectrum."

Granholm’s Cool Cities program dished out grants to communities with projects designed to make downtowns walkable and interconnected with public spaces.

The Democratic governor was sometimes ridiculed over the program.

"The folks who were not ridiculing the program were the folks who were operating it at the local level — the local stakeholders loved it," said Padden, whose firm conducted a review of the program’s grant winners and losers.

Public Policy Associates’ study found communities that didn’t win Cool Cities grants found positive changes occurred in fostering collaboration and long-term community planning between businesses, the local schools and government, workforce development officials and other stakeholders.

"Even the losers benefited," Padden said.

Dexter was not one of the communities that received a state grant from the Cool Cities program. But the vestiges of Cool Cities have shown up in the Washtenaw County community’s master plan, which has encouraged middle-density mixed-use redevelopment in and around the quaint downtown on the banks of Mill Creek, which flows into the nearby Huron River.
"Part of what replaced Cool Cities has just been the whole sense of place, placemaking initiatives and the whole missing middle conversation," said Michelle Aniol, community development director for the city of Dexter.

As a city, Dexter leaders took steps over the past decade to invest in its streetscape infrastructure, build a downtown creekside park and relocate its industrial businesses to a park on the outskirts of the city, Aniol said.

Aniol said those moves helped foster three mixed-use residential and commercial projects that could add nearly 200 residential units to downtown Dexter.

Two projects are under construction: the 76-unit Grandview Commons at Baker Road and Grand Street being built by Dexter-based A.R. Brouwer Co. and 150 Jeffords, a 22-unit mixed-used luxury condo building uphill from Mill Creek.

A third project next to Mill Creek with up to 90 residential units with a mix of owner and rental condos as well as office and retail space is in the pipeline, Aniol said.
As part of the construction of the Mill Creek park, the city worked with Washtenaw County to remove a dam and open up the waterway to kayaking. It now attracts kayakers who take a respite at a downtown coffee shop or bar, Aniol said.

"It's cool that way," she said.

Aniol said the lessons learned from the placemaking movement are starting to come to fruition in Dexter, as evidenced by the recent arrival of Commonwealth Heritage Group.

"If you don't continually reinvest, redevelop, breathe new life into your city, it dies," Aniol said. "You can't just do the streetscape, make everything look pretty and say, 'OK, we're done.' It doesn't work that way."

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