

DOWNTOWN SPRINGFIELD HAS TRANSFORMED ITSELF EVEN FASTER THAN DOWNTOWN EUGENE

BY BOB KEEFER

It's not Springtucky anymore.

Downtown Springfield, until recently known as home to dank dive bars and seedy strip clubs, has practically blossomed overnight into a hip, happening place.

The downscale bars and clubs are mostly gone, replaced by artisanal restaurants and trendy watering holes. Art galleries have sprung up next to new apartments. A new bike path meanders next to the river, the crime rate has plummeted and businesses that once would have located elsewhere now look to open their doors in Springfield.

Springfield, you might even say, has become Eugene's Brooklyn, a place of youth, opportunity and style. And, after years of groundwork by the city, the change has come about so quickly that half of Eugene doesn't seem to realize anything across the river has changed.

"Now there's lots of reasons for people to come downtown," says Courtney Griesel, the city's economic development manager. "You'll find people walking around downtown in the evening now. We're seeing more investment. And you'll see quite a few new projects in the coming months."

Among those projects are new restaurants, including the area's first Ethiopian eatery.

One objective measure of the downtown's success comes from police statistics. In the 400 block of Main Street, Springfield police were called 566 times from 2008-2010. In 2012-2014, the number of calls to that block dropped to just 74.

"The crime rate reduction has made a tremendous difference," says Niel Laudati, legislative and public affairs manager for the city. "That 400 block — it had the highest call volume in the city. It's now one of the safest blocks in Springfield."

As a result, when Rich Adams and Janet Smith needed more room in 2015 for their small company Sterling Graphics, which they were operating out of a studio at their Springfield home, they didn't think twice about locating in downtown.

"Springfield has certainly flourished in the past seven or eight years," Adams says. "As people got more comfortable coming downtown, the street has gotten cleaned up. The city has gained respectability. And property values have gone up. The whole city has grown steadily with interesting businesses opening up."

They opened the business at 432 A Street, just a block from the old high-crime district on Main Street. Adams says, "We're really enjoying being here. Where we're located is close to a couple watering holes and restaurants."

Some point to the opening of a new municipal jail in 2010 as one factor in the change. Frustrated by Lane County's catch-and-release policy for minor crimes, Springfield voters approved money for the Justice Center after politicians promised them a jail that would keep petty criminals locked up. Downtown crime began to fall almost immediately.

But crime was just one part of a bigger puzzle. People in Springfield, Laudati says, wanted a functional downtown that was not just safe but attractive. "The community pushed us to make downtown different," he says.

Voters in 2004 approved a downtown urban renewal district whose funding has helped with a wide variety of projects, from building a new theater and affordable apartments to, more recently, new signage and street lighting.

An early piece of the turnaround was the opening in 2000 of Emerald Art Center (EAC) at 500 Main Street. The building is privately owned by the Emerald Art Association, which has been in existence since the early 1970s. The group bought the building in 1997 and renovated it as a gallery and classroom space using a combination of grants, donations and volunteer labor.

EAC Executive Director Paula Goodbar says it wasn't until fall 2010 that she saw the first glimmers that downtown had at last begun to feel healthy and fun.

"We had Mayor Sid Leiken host a ribbon cutting ceremony at the NEDCO building in the 200 block of Main Street," she says. "That was our first official Springfield art walk."

It really came together for Goodbar the following spring.

"We were hosting a dance walk down Main Street and I noticed families were walking on Main Street and participating," she says. "It was at that moment that I knew there had been a shift from the Main Street that used to be filled with broken bottles and an unsafe environment to somewhere you could walk again with your family and enjoy your community."

Goodbar thinks the center, which attracts an average of 1,300 visitors a month, played a key role in the early revitalization. "EAC was the reason we decided to do an art walk," she says. "People were already attending opening receptions at the EAC. Why not use that as a foundation to build on by providing more venues with art?"

Two blocks east at 630 Main Street, the Richard E. Wildish Community Theater opened its doors in 2006. Designed by Eugene architect Otto Poticha, the theater is built on the site of an old movie house, which was razed to bare ground to make way for the svelte new hall, with its steeply raked seating providing a clear view from every seat and excellent acoustics.

At the time the Wildish opened, both the theater and the art center down the street felt like isolated outposts in a cultural desert. Now the Wildish has five resident performing companies — Chamber Music Amici, Swing Shift Jazz Orchestra, Riverside Chamber Symphony, Rose Children's Theatre and Ballet Fantastique Academy — and last year the hall was booked 150 days or evenings.

That was all prologue to the main event in Springfield's new downtown: the opening in 2013 of Plank Town Brewing Company at 346 Main Street.

Plank Town was the brainchild of Bart Caridio, who had taken a similar flier by opening Sam Bond's Garage in the Eugene's Whiteaker neighborhood in 1995, an era when the Whit was more run down than cool.

"I thought it was a good time for downtown Springfield," Caridio says. "The Main Street strip clubs had just closed the year before. It was still a little gnarly, but I saw a lot of similarities between the Whiteaker and the Washburne [neighborhood to the north of Springfield's downtown]. I felt the time was right and decided to go for it."

When he opened Sam Bond's, Caridio says, the Whit was plagued by open drug use and prostitution. It took years for the Eugene neighborhood to turn itself around, but now the Whit has become "a hot spot," he says.

The revitalization of downtown Springfield, Caridio says, has happened a lot faster — in large part because of a city government that's accessible and open to working with businesses.

"They are just really helpful," he says.

Still, he says, there is work to be done.

"I would like it if there were a few more late-night events going on," Caridio says. "After 9 o'clock it quiets down a lot."

That, he says, is partly because of downtown Springfield's lingering reputation, which, like all reputations, takes a long time to change.

"Even at Sam Bond's people still ask us if it's safe to park your car outside," Caridio says. "It takes time. The Whit still has that reputation 10 years into Sam Bond's being there."

Caridio, though, says the change is happening faster in Springfield than it did in the Whit. "When people come here for the first time, it's like 'Holy god! I didn't realize something like this could be happening in downtown Springfield!'" he says. "Now we're a destination spot."