

# RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL

## Urban expert lauds Reno's river district

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After years of trying, Reno has put in place many of the building blocks for a great downtown.

That's according to urban developer Christopher Leinberger. One of the top urbanists in the country, Leinberger pitched his philosophy of using 12 steps to revitalize downtowns this week to planners and residents at a Reno lecture.

Reno has assembled several important building blocks on the list: a number of new housing projects are under way or planned, several urban entertainment venues exist and it has a high-rise office district.

The new river district, including the kayak park and restaurants, a new art museum, the downtown events center and Virginia Street casinos, provide more entertainment than most cities.

But in Leinberger's brief trip to Reno, he said he sees a lack of overall management or strategy for downtown.

Reno is lacking a business improvement district from his 12-step recovery plan. Downtown still has a limited number of shops.

And the city's zoning laws sometimes trip businesses rather than make building easy. For example, the City Council is considering lifting a cap on liquor stores so Long's Drug Stores can move into the closed Riverboat casino.

More than 50 planners and concerned citizens came to hear Leinberger's lecture, one in a series sponsored by the local chapter of the American Planning Association and Scenic Nevada.

His 12 steps were published this month in a paper by the Brookings Institution. And with the institute, Leinberger said, he soon will publish the first rating guide for the nation's

**Downtown housing revival**

- 1 The Residences at Riverwalk:** The former Comstock hotel - casino at 700 W. Second St. is expected to open with 125 condominiums in August.
- 2 The Palladio:** Located at First and Sierra streets, the project is under construction and will include 92 condominium units. Expected to open in summer 2006.
- 3 Riverside Drive Condominiums:** Near Booth Street bridge, this project would include 40 condo units.
- 4 Virginia Street Senior Apartments:** Eighty-four subsidized units for seniors are under construction at Virginia and Thomas streets.
- 5 Belvedere Towers:** Former Sundowner hotel - casino at Arlington Avenue and Fourth Street, has turned in final plans for 186 condo units for the north tower. An equal number also could be built for the south tower.

**Note:** For the Palladio, the Belvedere Towers and the Comstock, the first floor or first few floors would be used for shops and restaurants or other commercial uses.

SOURCE: City of Reno, developers. © 2005 RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL

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### **BUILDING AN URBAN MAIN STREET**

- \* Buildings should have plenty of street-level windows and main entrances to the street.
- \* Adequate lighting to illuminate the building and provide for safety. Neon where appropriate to emphasize night-life.
- \* No blank walls longer than 10 feet.
- \* Sidewalks should have 48 inches of width for people to pass by any café tables. Trees and landscaping are required.
- \* Ban parking lots along streets.
- \* At street corners, large windows or angled walls with a door entry.
- \* Restore original facades of historic buildings

downtowns.

"We will either inspire cities or shame them," he said, into making their downtowns more "walkable" communities, places where the sights and sounds lure people to spend time walking and browsing.

by removing later materials where possible.  
Use original façade theme in renovation.  
*Source: City of Albuquerque's 2010 plan for downtown.*

Leinberger said he'd like to see more cities follow Albuquerque's example in throwing away a thick zoning code book and replacing it with a short list of design standards, such as pointing doorways to the street and provide interesting facades with lots of windows and lighting.

He favors building around parking garages to hide them. And he'd ban parking lots.

"Let private industry figure that out," he said.

But each downtown should set its own tone.

"It should be home-grown from the dirt up," he said.

Reno resident Aline Barber, who moved here eight years ago, liked what she heard. She said she wished more developers would favor buildings that set off the beautiful views of the mountains or tap into the city's rich history rather than settle for mediocrity.

"Where are the architects? Where is the vision?" she said.

Leinberger did not rate Reno after having spent only a few hours here. But he said downtown is further along than Albuquerque, which began rebuilding its downtown in 1998.

"This downtown pleasantly surprised me," he said. "It's much more complex. It has lots of assets. It needs to be better managed. If I were an investor, I think this would be an interesting place to invest."

Across the country, Leinberger said downtowns are enjoying a renaissance after 50 years of suburbanizing.

Of 60 downtowns he knows well, he said he'd give 36 of them top ratings. Twenty years ago, he'd have given only four top ratings.

But unlike strip shopping centers, building downtown takes money for real brick and architecture that will stand the test of close-up viewing and time, he said. Investors have to be patient in making profits and usually must provide more equity up front. But in the long run, he said, they'll make more money.

He said that's opposite of how commercial real estate typically works in strip malls. Investors look for a return of their money over seven years. And as a result, "builders over the last 40 years have done their damndest to build the cheapest."

He despises strip malls, saying they serve as "giant billboards" and are "built to be thrown away." National chain stores follow the strip centers and usually shy away from the risks in building downtown.

So downtown stores might have to be homegrown - but they're also more interesting. Only eight chain stores are among 650 shops in downtown Santa Fe, N.M., and it draws 3 million visitors a year.

In Albuquerque, his Arcadia Land Co. has partnered with a private foundation to rebuild downtown during the past eight years. Working in partnership with a private foundation, his company has built a 14-screen movie theater hidden behind offices and stores. And in "taming the big box, a city parking garage is buried behind condos, stores and restaurants," he said.

Over the years, a portion of the private-public partnership profits will go into building affordable housing.

Bob Rusk, a longtime downtown Reno businessman, said Leinberger's comments confirmed what he has believed for years.

"We have one of the potentially best downtowns for moving forward," Rusk said. But he said Reno needs that business improvement district on Leinberger's list.

"What's lacking today is a strong leadership that everybody buys into," Rusk said.

Some downtown property owners currently "hand over" extra property taxes to the city for extra police and extra maintenance to clean sidewalks. But if a business district controlled the purse strings for spending that money and some for promoting downtown, then businesses would become more involved, he said.

He said it wouldn't be long before businesses would be demanding more — such as expanding the cleaning district beyond a couple of blocks.

Reno community development director John Hester said Reno has some of the design elements Leinberger pitches, but downtown still comes under the thumb of the city's inch-thick zoning code ordinance.

The riverfront district has special requirements for the river and design. And for downtown, streetscape standards for sidewalks, trash receptacles and benches exist.

Reno has no designated walkable district downtown or standards requiring interesting facades or banning parking lots.

But change is coming.

The city's zoning code is now being overhauled and the 2002 regional plan requires special planning for downtown as a focal center, he said.

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