

URBAN REVIVAL DOWNTOWN'S APPEAL KEEPS GROWING

By PERRY SWANSON THE GAZETTE

Downtown Colorado Springs has rocketed back as a hip place to live after two decades of hemorrhaging residents, a new study for the Brookings Institution found.

Nobody would mistake it for a city that never sleeps, but downtown Colorado Springs is looking good compared with a couple of decades ago. The area saw a mass exodus during the 1970s and 1980s, when the population decreased by 38 percent, leaving only 3,401 people living downtown.

That trend reversed during the 1990s as the population grew by 1,634 people, an increase of nearly half. Downtown populations nationwide grew by 10.4 percent on average during the same period.

By the end of the '90s, Colorado Springs boasted a larger downtown population than many other cities, including Denver; Austin, Texas; Cincinnati; and Des Moines, Iowa, according to the study entitled "Who Lives Downtown."

A big part of the difference in populations comes from how downtown areas are defined. In Denver, for example, the study's boundaries exclude nearby residential areas such as Capitol Hill. In Colorado Springs, the boundaries are roughly Interstate 25 to Wahsatch Avenue and Uintah Street to the Nevada Avenue interchange with I-25.

The study is a new analysis of U.S. Census Bureau 2000 data. Its author, E.L. Birch, is chairwoman of the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of Pennsylvania.

Many downtown residents and business leaders are hoping for more growth, particularly more businesses that will draw outsiders. Those include George Hertner and Courtney Clifford, who live in a third-floor loft overlooking Tejon Street in the center of downtown.

"We like the arts, we like the community atmosphere downtown," Hertner said. "We need more of that here."

Their loft, with its balconies, high ceiling, wood floors and arched windows, looks like it belongs in Midtown Manhattan.

"We'd like to see a miniature version of that here," Hertner said.

The lofts on Tejon Street are not typical of downtown living. Units in the building have sold for \$259,000 to \$537,000 during the past four years, a price far out of reach for most downtown residents.

The study examined two neighborhoods identified by the Census that make up downtown, including one where the median annual income was \$14,700, and another where it was \$26,770. The median income for all of Colorado Springs was \$45,081 in 2000.

Many downtown homes are more like apartments owned by Jason Gleasman, who rents his 18 one-bedroom units on Weber Street for \$400 to \$450 per month. The main consumers for Gleasman's apartments are senior citizens, he said. The main selling point: convenience.

"They can just go out of their house, go over and pay their utility bill and take advantage of what's downtown," he said.

The relative bustle of today's downtown is starkly different from its recent history, said Chuck Murphy, a Colorado Springs businessman who has owned property downtown since 1969. As residents and businesses fled during the '70s and '80s, crime moved in and there was little left to draw people but a few dive bars. The "low point" came in 1991, Murphy said, when Fort Carson soldier Spc. Layne Schmidtke was kicked to death near the corner of Pikes Peak and Nevada avenues.

"There were no cars on the streets, nobody was downtown, and look at it today," Murphy said.

Murphy and other business people lobbied the City Council for the formation of a downtown business improvement district, a government agency that levies a property tax on businesses and uses the money to promote the area. The district pays for efforts to improve downtown such as Christmas decorations, landscaping and part of the money to run a free downtown shuttle that started in July 2004.

Despite the resurgence of downtown living during the 1990s, Colorado Springs had 485 fewer people living there in 2000 than 30 years earlier. The city's overall population increased 170 percent during the same period.

Property owners demolished houses to make way for parking lots and office buildings during that time, and other houses were converted to office space.

The Downtown Partnership, a nonprofit organization that promotes the area, is considering ways to bring back residential spaces such as tax credits and low-interest loans for people who buy or develop property.

One possibility is creating a government agency to build parking structures connected to apartment buildings, said Beth Kosley, the organization's executive director. Subsidized downtown parking might make the area more attractive as a place to live for some of the 21,000 people who already work there, Kosley said.

The Downtown Partnership also is working on policies to encourage more entertainment and cultural venues, plus a mix of high-end and affordable housing.

"My vision is that the downtown is just teeming with people day and night doing all kinds of different things," Kosley said.

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HUNTER McRAE, THE GAZETTE - George Hertner and Courtney Clifford's downtown loft off Tejon Street. Downtown areas across the nation rebounded during the 1990s after two decades of decline. Now the Springs has a bigger downtown population than Denver.

Moving downtown

Boundaries of downtown Colorado Springs, as defined in the Brookings Institution study *Who Lives Downtown*.

