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# Downtown's hopping again

## Revamped Square, new restaurants and nightclubs a hit

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More than a decade after the city of Cincinnati poured millions into the so-called Backstage Entertainment District in hopes of sparking downtown nightlife, the blocks north of Fountain Square are finally catching fire.

Last year's renovation of Fountain Square itself gets a lot of the credit, having given investors added assurance that downtown has turned the corner.

But it seems to be a combination of factors in addition to Fountain Square - more residents, improved public safety measures and more effective leadership at City Hall and from Cincinnati Center City Development Corp. (3CDC) - that is finally drawing a critical mass of businesses and people to downtown streets after 6 p.m.

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The estimated 40,000 visitors descending on downtown for the annual Macy's Music Festival this weekend will find that activity along Seventh and Walnut streets has increased considerably since last year with the opening of several chain-based venues: Sully's Sports Bar & Grill, The Lodge Bar and Cadillac Ranch Rock-N-Country Bar & Grill.

Others in the near future include homegrown entrants such as the proposed Bootsy Ruby nightclub, for which restaurateur Jeff Ruby and funk musician Bootsy Collins have been eyeing a spot on Walnut Street, and Buddakhan's Classic Rock Café, which is now being worked on, on Vine Street just north of Seventh.

New restaurants are also in the works at Sixth and Walnut, with Minneapolis-based Oceanaire slated to open in the newly revamped 580 Building and Boca Restaurant Group's Mexican restaurant Nada going into the space across the street that used to house Bella.

The new, evolving Backstage District - if that's what it's becoming - currently follows an L shape along Seventh and Walnut streets, beginning with Sully's at Seventh and Race and terminating at the Cadillac Ranch at Sixth and Walnut. It could be extended further west in September when Sung Korean Bistro opens at Seventh and Elm.

A couple of years ago, "you couldn't get anyone to come down to Seventh Street to save your life," said Danny Dell, a bar and restaurant consultant who has been hired to get Buddakhan's ready for a September opening. Back then, in the wake of the highly publicized closing of Maisonette and La Normandie, landlords desperate for tenants were practically giving away spots, Dell said.

Now suitable spots for nightclubs are becoming scarce.

"The obituary for downtown was written prematurely," said Arn Bortz, a partner at Towne Properties, which has developed properties along the budding entertainment corridor and elsewhere downtown.

The most immediate explanation for the rash of new businesses is the rebirth of Fountain Square. But there's more to it than that, according to Bortz. He credits the arrival of more affordable clubs catering to younger customers - complementing the higher-end restaurants overlooking Fountain Square - with bringing new energy

to the streets.

The idea is to make downtown a 24-hour-a-day destination for people who might not even know exactly where they're going to spend the evening.

"But they know they can enjoy a good time on Seventh Street or around Fountain Square simply by going downtown, parking and enjoying a number of different venues," Bortz said.

"It's a critical mass of different activities and choices, and not everybody wants to or can afford the higher-end, white-tablecloth restaurants that are clustered around Fountain Square."

That new energy, and the consumer dollars that accompany it, is attracting more investment and also flows into older businesses that survived the dry spell.

Natalie Zelina, manager of Rockin' Robin's, said her business has been picking up, and there's even been informal talk of street festivals *a la* the Main Street entertainment district.

"Now all of a sudden, there's people everywhere," she said. "It's wonderful."

"I think slowly people are starting to be less fearful. The more people who are down here, the better off we're all going to be."

Don Wilson, hands-on owner of Madonna's Bar & Grill for the past 10 years, said his core customer base consists of employees from nearby restaurants and clubs, so the growth adds to his business.

"Ruby's people are in here. McFadden's people are in here. Any bar or restaurant in the area .... this is their place to go when they get off," Wilson said.

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GREG LORING FOR THE ENQUIRER

The patio at Cadillac Ranch Rock-N-Country Bar & Grill, Sixth and Walnut streets, was filled Thursday night. Such downtown buzz is a recent development.

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