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Developer gives downtown Nampa a breath of fresh air

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Laurel MacKinnon has visions of an attractive, busy hub

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NAMPA -- As a youngster in Nampa, Laurel MacKinnon watched movies at the Frontier Cinema with her friends and wished the downtown area had more shops and things to do.

"You'd want there to be stores, but there weren't," she said. "I've always been attracted to the downtown."

Now the 33-year-old developer from Washington, D.C., is investing in her own wish.

MacKinnon, who co-owns an East Coast development company, recently used her own money to buy a brick building at 13th Avenue and 1st Street. She's bent on seeing downtown Nampa become a commercial and residential hub.

She is looking at other buildings and helping city officials and business owners put together financial incentives that may include low-interest and long-term loans for businesses that expand or move downtown.

Dave Lancaster, a business owner and the Downtown Business Association's president, said MacKinnon is "the best thing that's ever happened to downtown -- the spark that brought Nampa back."

"She's dynamite," business owner Darlene Johnson said. "It's like a breath of fresh air. She's got some great dreams. She knows how to get things done."

MacKinnon said the city's recently adopted Central Nampa Revitalization Blueprint for pumping new life into downtown, new zoning and a new city administration were major influences in her decision to buy the building.

"Now we can actually market the buildings and get the momentum to bring folks into downtown," she said.

She's already persuaded One More Cup, a hip gathering spot near Wal-Mart on 12th Avenue Road, to move into the building and expand.

"We'll be doubling our space," said Kendra Lubiens, owner of One More Cup.

Lubiens plans to add food items and possibly a stage in the basement for live weekend entertainment. She'll open the downtown shop in August and close the 12th Avenue Road store in October.

Business owners and city officials said MacKinnon's plans match their own and the revitalization blueprint.

"I think she has a real strong vision and she has a lot of energy. She understands what a strong downtown needs," said City Councilman Bob Schmidt.

MacKinnon's building was constructed in 1908, a year before the fire of 1909 that burned much of downtown Nampa. The brick structure survived.

Canyon County Historical Museum curator Wendy Miller said the brick building originally housed Roberts Dry Good Store. Some time in the 1920s or 1930s, (Clarence) Baker Drug Store located there, and in the 1940s, Horton Electric. Current tenants include Mary's La Novia Feliz, a bridal shop, and Rehab Authority offices.

A second floor of more than 20 one- and two-room apartments with high ceilings has been vacant for decades. In a few places, ceiling plaster has fallen from water damage. Birds are nesting in the window vents. Dirt covers hardwood floors and plaster walls.

"All I could see was a mess," Lancaster said. "She saw the hardwood floors and the high ceilings."

MacKinnon intends to renovate the 17,000-square-foot building starting with the first floor and the basement. She wants to renovate the building to its original form and plans to remove a small building that was added later in the alley. An atrium-type entrance will lead to the second floor, which will have high-end apartments, a few boutique hotel rooms and possibly some offices. Construction will use environmentally safe and recycled materials as much as possible, MacKinnon said.

"I love downtowns. I think it's the heart of the community. It's where you build your commercial base," she said.

Schmidt said owners and investors have noticed what MacKinnon, downtown supporters and the city are doing. He said after the City Council approved new zoning April 18, interested buyers approached several downtown building owners.

"It's already proven it was the right step to take," Schmidt said. "It's an investment in downtown, not people buying real estate to hold onto it."

The downtown is moving forward in other ways as well. Schmidt said financial incentives for businesses could be in place in about 60 days. And the Central Nampa Revitalization Committee is meeting to work on issues including sign issues, business retention and recruitment.

"We're getting to the meat and potatoes," Johnson said.

MacKinnon and others said it's going to take a communitywide effort to create a thriving downtown.

"We have lots of history and great businesses," Johnson said. "We just need more."

"Everyone needs to take a risk," MacKinnon said.

Community events planned in Nampa

For a look at upcoming community events scheduled for downtown Nampa, see Local 5

Downtown events in Nampa

Here's a look at upcoming community events scheduled for downtown Nampa:

13th Avenue Affair

The first 13th Avenue Affair will be from noon to 4 p.m. May 21 on 13th Avenue between 1st and 2nd streets. The event will feature wines from The Winery, Carmela, Williamson Vineyard, Ste. Chapelle and Sawtooth Winery; hors d'oeuvres from Copper Canyon; and live music by Midnight Movers. Some proceeds go to the Nampa Boys and Girls Club. Sponsors include Copper Canyon, Darlene's Printing and Kats House of Blues.

Downtown Nampa Nights

The Mystics will play classic rock 'n' roll to kick off Downtown Nampa Nights at 5:30 p.m. May 19 at the corner of 12th Avenue and 1st Street. The weekly summer event will be from 5:30 to 8 p.m. each Thursday through August.

May 26: The Red & Gray Blues Band (blues-based rock)

June 2: Straight Shooter (rock 'n' roll, country rock)

June 9: Ultrasound

June 16: The Rockin' Hippies

June 23: Walter Ego (blues)

June 30: Rebecca Scott (folk rock)

July 7: Curley Surles (country)

July 14: Midnight Mover (rhythm and blues, classic rock)

July 21: Buckhorn Mountain Boys (traditional bluegrass)

July 28: The Nowhere Men (Beatles tribute)

Aug. 4: Suns of the Beach (surf music, '50s rock)

Aug. 11: The Matrix Band (rock 'n' roll)

Aug. 18: The Blues Brothers, (rock and soul revue)

Aug. 25: Frim Fram 4 (jazz and standards)

About the Blueprint

The Central Nampa Revitalization Blueprint was created with the help of a consultant from previous revitalization plans and studies and from public comments and meetings during the past four years. It addresses physical improvements, gateways, signage, circulation, parking, management, business retention and recruitment, and special projects such as a new library. It also sets out an action plan and resources for achieving the blueprint.

To offer story ideas or comments, contact reporter Sandra Forester at sforesteridahostatesman.com or 377-6464.

Cutline: Washington, D.C., property developer Laurel MacKinnon is investing in downtown Nampa to breathe some life back into her hometown. MacKinnon recently purchased a building at 13th Avenue and 1st Street. She has big plans for it, including a new coffee shop and high-end apartments. MacKinnon says Nampa's recently adopted downtown revitalization plan was a major factor in her decision.