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History helps revive Nampa center

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'Belle District' will honor wife of town's pioneer

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NAMPA -- Developer Laurel MacKinnon believes more than renovation is necessary to turn Nampa's downtown into a thriving commercial center.

It takes a theme and a vision, she said, such as the Pearl District that transformed a blighted warehouse area in Portland. Inspired by that area, MacKinnon purchased four historic buildings and a vacant lot on Nampa's 13th Avenue South last year and plans to make them the anchor of the "Belle District."

At least two new specialty shops are planned in MacKinnon's buildings this spring, and she eventually hopes the area will sprout a boutique hotel, office suites and high-end clothing stores. The four buildings total 75,500 square feet of potential retail and office space, she said.

For now, MacKinnon's plans are limited to her buildings on 13th Avenue between 1st and 2nd streets, plus a vacant lot she hopes to develop on the north side of 1st. But she hopes the Belle District concept spreads to businesses on adjoining blocks.

She named the area to honor Isobel "Belle" Hagan Dewey, wife of Nampa promoter W.H. Dewey. He was a speculator and miner who bailed out the Nampa Townsite Co. in 1896 by paying off creditors with \$6,000 and taking possession of 2,000 townsites.

The Deweys built many buildings in downtown Nampa, including the New Dewey Scales Building. Located at the corner of 1st Street and 13th Avenue South, it is now owned by MacKinnon.

Belle Dewey is noted in a local newspaper from the early 1900s for constructing and selling homes. She also helped found the Woman's Century Club, which created Nampa's first library and today is helping with the city's efforts to construct a new library.

"What's really great about the Belle District is the history is already there," MacKinnon said. "We're not creating anything."

The concept ties together many elements in Nampa's past and present, such as the railroad and its historic downtown, with the romance and adventure of the 19-year-old Belle marrying the 52-year-old Dewey in San Francisco and moving to the rugged Owyhee Mountains mining town of Silver City and eventually Nampa to raise a family.

"When we bumped into Belle, the story is very romantic," said Glenn Rummmler of Blam Design, who researched and created the concept. "She was very involved in society. Belle -- the name was right. It was just one of those lightning bolt deals."

Concepts like the Pearl District and Boise's Linen District give residents and customers a sense of place and make shopping, working or living in the area an experience -- which can translate into more business for retailers in the district, Rummmler said.

"Nampa already has it," Rummmler said. "They just need to uncover it and let everybody know they have it."

MacKinnon envisions the Belle District spurring renewal of the city's heart into a place where people can live, work, shop, eat and enjoy community together.

"We want it to be vibrant, a place to go, a certain quality and elegance you won't find somewhere else," she said.

"It's an interesting concept to bring history and identity to downtown," Nampa Mayor Tom Dale said. "Anything that helps to do that is a great idea. I'm very interested in how it's going to work out."

A couple of longtime Nampa residents, who are opening up new ventures in MacKinnon's buildings, say they support the Belle District, and they believe Canyon County residents shouldn't have to drive to Boise for fine restaurants and specialty shops.

"I did the research and saw great potential in the location and the number of households that have to drive to Boise for culture, clothing, food and entertainment," said Mary Chown, a 25-year Nampa resident. "I just plain got angry."

Chown plans to open Ewephoria, a shop featuring yarn and other fiber materials, about the beginning of April at the corner of 13th Avenue and 1st Street.

"People who wish to be creative can express themselves through these fibers," said Chown, an art mom for 15 years while her children attended school. She also ran a business making knitted hats. "It's not going to be your grandma's knit shop. It's going to be a fiber art gallery."

The city's plan for downtown improvements, financial and staff support, and changes in zoning and design review

made it attractive to plan a business, Chown said.

"This city is doing some really good foundational work to make that area work," Chown said. "This time around, the city is putting things in place."

Deb Cameron, who was raised in Nampa and owns Henny Penny Produce, agreed and said it's vital that Nampa's revitalization effort be done right.

"Nampa used to be the core of everything," she said. "It's not just changing the physical atmosphere but changing the mental perception. It's all about really quality things."

Cameron plans to open Market Limone this spring on 13th Avenue South across from the Copper Canyon.

Construction should start within two weeks, she said.

The market will offer ready-made and specialty foods, fresh breads daily, local produce, meat and dairy, cooking classes such as how to cook for people who are gluten-intolerant, wine tasting, kitchen items, and gifts. Shoppers will find a mezzanine with books, Internet access and information, and, in the basement, one of a kind home decor pieces and furniture.

"I'm committed to making this happen in Nampa," Cameron said.

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Belle District Who was Belle?

This recently erected sign on 13th Avenue South announces plans for a new market in a long-vacant space that used to house an appliance and furniture store. The building is one of several historic downtown buildings being converted into the Belle District.

Isobel Hagan was born in Longford, Ireland, on Oct. 8, 1855. Her family immigrated in 1865 to San Francisco and she met Col. William Henry Dewey while he was in the city on business. They married in April 1875 and moved to Silver City, where Dewey was in mining.

"She raised the kids and took care of things while Dewey was gone. She had to be a wonderful woman to put up with her husband; he was gone constantly," said Wendy Miller, curator of the Canyon County Historical Museum. "She was independent and intelligent."

Belle Dewey stood by her husband, who was given the nickname "colonel" by stockholders of a mine because of his "grand, free-wheeling style," even when he was convicted and later acquitted of murdering a bartender, Miller said. The trial put the Deweys \$40,000 in debt. So Belle Dewey sewed thick knee patches on her husband's pants, and he crawled on his hands and knees for six months until he found the gold vein that became the Empire State Mine, according to a history written by Miller.

The Deweys bought the town of Boonville, built the town of Dewey near Silver City, put in railroad tracks that reached from Nampa to Murphy, incorporated the Idaho Northern Railroad, and purchased mines in Central Idaho, according to Miller.

About 1900, they moved to Nampa and built the Dewey Palace Hotel for \$250,000, she said. The Deweys moved into the hotel in 1902 and W.H. Dewey died the next year. The grand downtown structure was razed in 1963.

Belle Dewey may later have lived upstairs in the former Dewey Scales Building at the corner of 1st Street and 13th Avenue, Miller said.

Belle Dewey helped organize the Woman's Century Club and was active in fundraising for St. Paul's Catholic Church, Miller said.

"She doesn't seem to have been the society type or one to flaunt her wealth, but she lived well," Miller said.

She drove an electric car and liked to travel, spending 1908 in Europe with her daughter, Miller said. She lived the last two years of her life in California because of her health. She was visiting Nampa when she died in 1918 at the age of 62.

Nampa businesses closed during the hours of her funeral, Miller said.

"I think it's neat that a woman of that era is recognized," she said.

-- Sandra Forester

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

Cutline: This recently erected sign on 13th Avenue South announces plans for a new market in a long-vacant space that used to house an appliance and furniture store. The building is one of several historic downtown buildings being converted into the Belle District.

Cutline: Laurel MacKinnon purchased these three buildings on Nampa's 13th Avenue South and a fourth building across the street.

Cutline: A family photo taken about the time of their 1875 marriage shows W.H. Dewey and Belle Dewey, both seated, surrounded by Ed Dewey, left, Dewey's son by a former marriage, and Belle's sisters, Maggie, center, and Mary.

Laurel MacKinnon

Mary Chown

Deb Cameron

