

Special

Connecting the dots: NOTO, downtown blend efforts to revitalize core

By Jonna Lorenz / Special to The Capital-Journal

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A vibrant arts district can be a crown jewel for a city, and Topeka is embracing the NOTO Arts & Entertainment District as economic development momentum builds both north and south of the Kansas River.

“It doesn’t do us any good to have a segmented approach to this,” NOTO executive director Tom Underwood said. “It’s more of a comprehensive strategic approach.”

NOTO’s role in Topeka’s revitalization has been underscored by such efforts as a recent grant from the Joint Economic Development Organization and inclusion in a TIF district proposed for downtown redevelopment efforts. Underwood noted that he works closely with Downtown Topeka Inc. and is involved with Momentum 2022.

Along with downtown and the riverfront area, NOTO is identified as part of the “Downtown Regional Core” by Momentum 2022, the city’s comprehensive economic development plan funded by the Topeka Community Foundation, GO Topeka, Heartland Visioning, Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library and United Way of Greater Topeka.



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“While we might be doing things in NOTO that are going to be unique to NOTO, we also want to make sure we’re sharing that information and vice versa with both sides of the river,” Underwood said. “Bottom line, we don’t want the river to be a divider between north and south. In fact, I think that with the riverfront development, I would say the potential of the river being a connector between the north and south is getting stronger every day.”

Mike Foster, chair-elect of NOTO and director of ministry operations at the Topeka Rescue Mission, remembers when North Topeka was a vibrant area in his youth.

“Then it went horribly down and became a place you didn’t want to be at all,” he said. “Since the NOTO district was established (in the early 2010s), it’s just been a tremendous transformation.”

Every month, more than 3,000 people visit North Topeka for the ARTSConnect First Friday Artwalk. The success of that event spurred many businesses in the district to open Thursday through Saturday year-round and talk is ongoing to further expand hours in the district.

Still, Foster said his perception is that the district had been largely overlooked by city leaders until recently.

“There has been a diligent effort I believe in all the planning that’s going on for the entirety of the city and what’s going on downtown to include NOTO as part of that,” he said. “That has really changed I’d say in the last year to two years to really embrace NOTO and to try to include us with what’s going on downtown.”

The momentum in the district gave rise to a capital campaign and the May groundbreaking for Redbud Park.

“That’s a hallmark that’s been identified as something the district wants and finds value in,” Underwood said of the park, which will include art displays and an outdoor stage for bands and other performances. “I think that the visitors to this destination area will find value in it and it’ll be a wonderful complement to the district. That’s probably one of the biggest things that we’ve identified in this past year.”

The capital campaign, which was about \$500,000 from reaching its goal by May, includes \$900,000 for the park, \$990,000 for the NOTO Arts District and \$210,000 for the NOTO Arts Center.

“I’m tickled,” Underwood said of the progress made toward the fundraising goal. “Very satisfied. The fact that out of a \$2.1 million campaign we’re less than \$500,000 away from achieving our goal, I think that’s pretty good.”

In December, the Joint Economic Development Organization granted \$644,000 to support NOTO Arts District, assisting in efforts to add parking and establish Redbud Park.

“Tom’s been just instrumental in getting us to the point that we are now,” NOTO board member Claudia Larkin said. “Not only do we have Redbud Park going, but we’re working on creating a breezeway between the arts center and the building to the south that allows for tables and chairs and lighting and music and places for people to sit and collect and gather. Part of the capital campaign is to help finish the basement in the Arts Center so we can create better classrooms down there. That capital campaign is robust in the number of things that it’s raising money to do.”

The NOTO Arts Center is a multifunctional building that serves as the administrative offices for the NOTO Arts & Entertainment District, houses the Morris Art Gallery and includes space for meetings and art classes.

During the past year, the district has welcomed many new businesses, including Studio 62, Fire Me Up Ceramics and Fine Art Studios, Onyx Salon and Wellness Spa, Dirty Girl Adventures and Compass Point.

“We are welcoming new businesses pretty much on a monthly basis down here,” Underwood said. “People still want to own their own business. People still want to have an impact on the neighborhood and the community.”

Cody Foster, founder of AIM Strategies, which owns several buildings in downtown, said two of the finalists for Topeka’s “Shark Tank”-inspired Top Tank entrepreneurship competition planned to open in NOTO.

He said NOTO and downtown have distinct characteristics that are complementary.

“On the Kansas Avenue side, you have the Capitol and you have 10-, 12-, 15-story buildings and towers. In NOTO, you definitely have more cool, old buildings that lend themselves to more of an arts district,” he said. “The buildings are so substantially different between the two spaces that utilizing them for the best use is probably pretty important.”

As more businesses open in NOTO, talk is underway about expanding hours in the district beyond those that sprang forth from the First Fridays Artwalks. Underwood described it as a chicken-and-egg scenario with businesses hesitant to open if customers aren’t going to be there and customers not wanting to go to NOTO to find it closed.

“Do I wish that there was more continuity of hours? Sure. But I also understand that not all small businesses are the same,” Underwood said. “They have to determine what’s their capacity. Most of these places are mom-and-pop shops. If they’re going to stay open late on a Friday night, then guess who’s doing it? It’s the same people who are there all the rest of the time, too, or else they have to pay somebody, and they may not have that in their budget.”

As more people become engaged with NOTO, expanded hours are likely to follow.

“We’re not working toward a more vibrant arts and entertainment district to only be open a few hours here and there,” said Caleb Asher, board chair of NOTO Arts District and president and CEO of Sprout Creative. “I think we’re all looking at how are we open for business throughout the week, attracting all kinds of different people, where you can come and join an art class or buy a piece of art but then also enjoy a craft beer or go to a different store.”

As the owner of a business and property on Kansas Avenue south of the river, and chair of NOTO, Asher is invested in seeing growth on both sides of the river.

“I want to connect the dots,” he said. “I want to see this corridor continue. I want to see people work together for the good of our greater community. ... I think there are little wins and successes over the past year or two with just being part of meetings and committees where we’re saying, ‘Hey, let’s not forget what’s going on over here.’”

Asher credits the successes in NOTO today to the tenacity and vision of leaders who came before, including Anita Wolgast and John Hunter, who co-chaired a project to develop an arts district a decade ago.

“That is one thing that I think is really important as we are moving full steam ahead is celebrate those moments and then also celebrate the businesses that have been in NOTO for years, well before it was ever this new vision of arts and entertainment,” Asher said. “As the current board chair, I don’t take for granted that there were a lot of people well before me that had the vision, and now I get to come in and go to a groundbreaking and hopefully a ribbon-cutting here later this year and celebrate when I know there was so much hard work and vision well before now.”