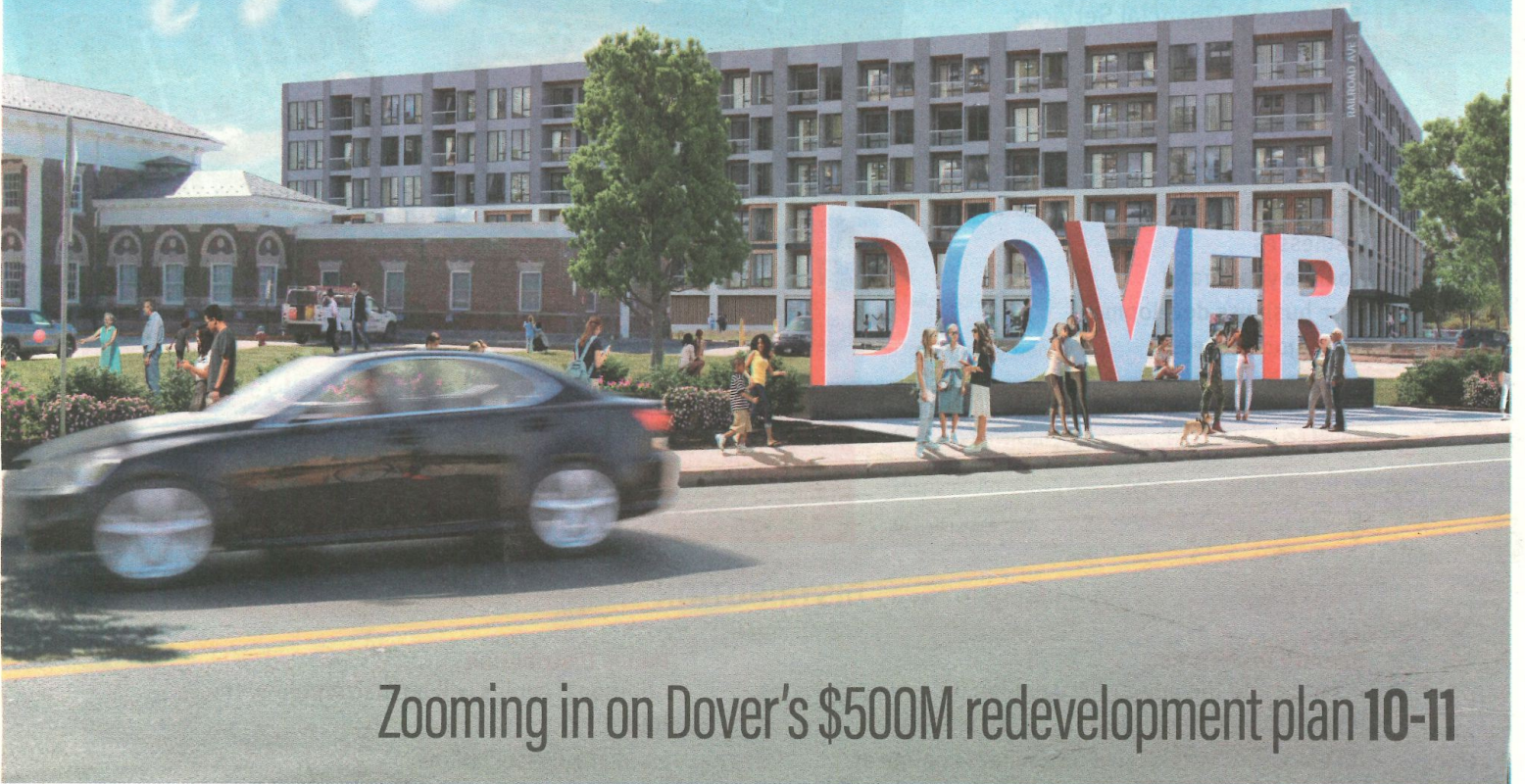


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A Capital Plan

Inside Downtown Dover's bet for rebirth

By Maddy Lauria
Contributing Writer

On the other side of downtown Dover from where Kristin Stonesifer serves coffee to a growing number of patrons, a demolition site will soon become an emblem of what she and many others hope will finally be a resurgence of Delaware's capital city.

Those behind the scenes of Dover's redevelopment efforts say it's the far less visible work, from conversations to permits, that are moving some properties toward a meticulously planned — and pricey — rebirth of downtown. Recent announcements touting tens of millions of dollars may be the key in helping naysayers shift to a more hopeful outlook on the city's future growth, this Kent County native and business owner said.

"It's time," said Stonesifer, who owns House of Coffi near the corner of Loockerman and State streets. "There's a lot happening that's about to pop."

Stonesifer said she can take no credit for the progress she and others think is about to "pop," in part due to the dogged efforts of the Downtown Dover Partnership (DDP) and anyone else willing to bet a stake on the historic city.

The demolition on Forest Street may mark the westernmost and most visible impact of the changes starting this spring. But will starting

with a fraction of the full investment needed to support infrastructure improvements and redevelopment in downtown Dover be enough to turn the tide of business churn and scarce foot traffic along Loockerman?

Some, like DDP's Executive Director Diane Laird, say yes. But it won't happen overnight.

"There's going to become a tipping point in downtown Dover where we will have more second locations of businesses that are already successful and we'll also have new starts of businesses where people are in a position to run a successful, sustainable business," she said. "We haven't quite reached that tipping point yet."

'This is no accident'

At the end of March 2024, the most drastic visual change so far in downtown Dover has been a construction site at the corner of S. Governor's Avenue and Water Street, where \$118 million in public funding is being invested in a new three-story Kent County Family Court courthouse that will replace an outdated facility on Court Street and add a 378-car parking garage into the downtown mix.

While the new courthouse wasn't exactly part of the master plan for Dover, it's been a more than welcome addition. The project is slated for

Dover officials are hoping that their downtown corridor can be reimagined by \$500 million in investment that would bring more apartments and first-floor retail to the city. | PHOTO COURTESY OF DOWNTOWN DOVER PARTNERSHIP

completion at the end of 2025.

"Most people don't realize that the master plan initiative, the visibility that the master plan is starting to get ... it actually has had a residual effect of spurring development in other parts of Dover," said Ken Anderson, DDP's property development director. "[The] dots are easy to connect when you look at the vastness of the master plan and the total development that's anticipated over the next three to five years."



Coney Island Grill is one of a few businesses that have opened in the past four years in downtown Dover. PHOTO COURTESY OF DOWNTOWN DOVER PARTNERSHIP

It's been about a year now since DDP and its partners unveiled an extensive master plan for redeveloping the heart of the city, one that's going to require at least \$500 million in funding (which

doesn't include the courthouse) to spur even more investment from private developers, develop interconnectedness between key players and employers like Bayhealth, the Dover Air Force Base, Delaware State University and state government, as well as add about 2,000 new residents.

Since that plan was laid out, most of the moving parts have been under the radar. At least until earlier this year, when elected officials announced \$25 million in funding from Gov. John Carney that will fuel another \$80 million investment at a key site on S. Governors Avenue, just a few blocks from the new courthouse. Here, construction is slated to begin within the next year on a 300-space parking garage along with a six-story complex that will include a grocery store, daycare, retail and over 100 rental units. Developers behind this first multi-use project, including Philadelphia-based Mosaic Development Partners, are also on board with a multi-year vision for a more interconnected way of living in a city just shy of 40,000 people.

"What we've really focused on is really being the catalyst to bring others in," said Mosaic Co-Founder and CEO Gregory Reaves. "We believe

that development and developers with new ideas and new approaches, it's good for downtown Dover. And we're already seeing traction."

As shovels start to hit the ground, other incentives like DDP's Critical Improvements Program have pumped another \$1.2 million into the downtown to make improvements to existing buildings, such as updating ADA access and commercial kitchens at new eateries on Loockerman and N. West Street.

Even local zoning rules are shifting to make room for Dover to grow. That includes rethinking parking needs along with building designs, considering new parking garages are being proposed for redevelopment on Governors Avenue as well as at the site of the new courthouse. Zoning changes that will make way for development laid out in the plans have recently been passed by city officials, Reaves noted. Laird said the city is currently assessing the water and wastewater needs that new development in the downtown will spark.

"You're right in the nexus," Anderson said.

Just in the past year or so, there's also been the opening of a new middle school campus. The Rail Haus beer garden has been attracting new fans throughout the cold winter months. About 1 mile away from those brews and eats, the 100-000-plus-square-foot courthouse is emerging from the ground. At Loockerman Plaza, the former U.S. Post Office site has been sold above its asking price, and fingers are crossed that it will soon become even more new eateries and apartments for those looking to land in downtown Dover.

Anderson and others pointed to DDP's years of planning as the root cause of some of these "residual" benefits popping up around the city.

"The Downtown Dover Partnership has been relentless," said Stonesifer, who opened her business near the corner of Loockerman and State streets six years ago and noted that she's seen 10 to 12 percent year-over-year growth in her business. "They've taken each small success and allowed that small success to catapult them forward. This is no accident."

Orchestrating change

For those like Anderson, the most drastic changes so far have been made not with power tools but in conversations with critical

facets of the community, like the People's Church of Dover, he said. The creation of Dover's master plan relied heavily on community input, which included insight from over 800 residents across dozens of in-person and virtual meetings. The idea is more of a "placemaking" approach, in which the mixed-use vision also incorporates public arts and equitable access for both diverse businesses and residents.

As he described a current tipping point for downtown Dover's development on the horizon, Anderson noted a journey parallel to the early days of investment by the Buccini/Pollin Group in Wilmington.

and city officials draft the master plan guiding many of these developments.

Just over a decade ago, some of the key players now involved in downtown Dover's impending rebirth previously also worked together at the former Delaware Economic Development Office, once known as DEDO for short. Through their time there, both Anderson and Laird led state-backed efforts to spur investment and business acumen in local endeavors and downtown districts through efforts like the Project Pop-Up program. Mosaic's Reaves also spent time previously working with them as he helped launch an entrepreneurial training

bringing in the people who are already in the area for those anchors, but who leave to shop, eat and play elsewhere, like along Route 13. Those four key anchors in Dover aren't new or different, but the recent wave of public and private funding, as well as the behind-the-scenes efforts to make a more cohesive community, are what supporters believe will make the difference this time around.

Yet, for years, Dover's downtown commercial vacancy rate has hovered at about 50 percent, DDP's Laird said. DDP offers resources to help with recruitment and retention of businesses, but the churn of businesses has remained steady.



Mosaic Development Partners studied ten sites in the city and identified suggested concepts to revitalize them for the future. | IMAGE COURTESY OF DOWNTOWN DOVER PARTNERSHIP

Before the arguably successful Riverfront redevelopment efforts, investors took a great risk banking on Wilmington at a time when people really weren't hopeful about the city's resurgence, he recalled. State support on the heels of those investments spurred more interest and investment and, with time, that developer's risk has seemingly paid off.

So, too, could be the case for Dover and the developers at Mosaic, which is doing similar work in some Philadelphia communities.

"I'm a big believer in painting the picture and working backwards," said Mosaic's Reaves. Mosaic helped DDP

program in Delaware.

Now they're tag-teaming their expertise and resources on the heart of the First State, where they say long-standing community "anchors" like the Dover Air Force Base, Bayhealth Medical, Delaware State University and the state have an inextricably linked role in seeing this plan through.

"We don't have the high-quality assets they want," Reaves said. "We believe they will be a real critical place to focus to bring people down. The plan was never about bringing all new people to the downtown Dover district."

Part of the plan has focused on

Base-level rental rates downtown can cost less than half of what commercial properties on Route 13 demand, since there's just inherently far more traffic along the highway than downtown streets, a local real estate agent said. That's always going to be a challenge for Dover's downtown.

For some, this new vision, and the few visible markers of it coming to fruition, are enough to keep the hope alive for Dover's resurgence.

"I am thinking that it's a little bit overdue, considering that it's the capital of the First State," said House of Coffin's Stonesifer. "I'm enthusiastic about the future." **DBT**