

# Developing Champaign- Urbana

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A new hotel will soon replace the "Big Hole" in downtown Champaign and add to the vibrancy of the area.

Projects in Downtown Champaign, Midtown, Campustown, and Urbana promise to contribute much to the area.



Wander around Downtown Champaign streets and it won't be long until you notice the "Big Hole" at the corner of Church and Neil streets. The former site of the Metropolitan Building has been unsightly since a fire in 2008. Redevelopment of the site, now in the works, promises to not only restore the aesthetics of the Downtown, but also boost revitalization efforts. With this development, along with recent improvements made at Midtown, projects underway in Urbana, and new construction in Campustown, vitality is all around in Champaign-Urbana.

## Bye Bye Big Hole

Hans Grotelueschen, CEO of YG Financial Group, recently announced that a Hyatte Place is expected to replace the hole left by the fire that destroyed the Metropolitan Building in Downtown Champaign. According to Grotelueschen, it is his fate to bring this new development to Downtown.

"I am a business consultant by trade, with many clients in the Downtown business district," Grotelueschen said. "Since the tragic fire, there has been a considerable amount of conversation in the Downtown business community about a possible hotel. In listening to my clients, I found myself in the unique position of being able to drive this project forward. I would consider this more my fate than a result of my planning toward my long-term goals."

The hotel will not only bring new life to the corner of Neil and Church streets, it will bring jobs, consumers, money, and new perspectives, too. The project is expected to provide millions of dollars for local construction jobs, as well as the full array of jobs that come with the operation of a hotel.

According to Grotelueschen, the hotel is planned to have facilities to serve approximately 150 people per day. Those people will enjoy the shops, restaurants, and bars that Downtown has to offer. There are about 25 local restaurants and bars and many more businesses within two blocks of the hotel, so guests will be able to walk to their evening meals or entertainment and enjoy the "micro-urban" alternative to traditional interstate hotels. The influx of consumers in Downtown will provide additional economic stability to the area and create a more vibrant experience for visitors.

"The hotel will not only bring guests and dollars to the Downtown businesses, but it will also provide an opportunity for visitors to experience one of the best attributes of Champaign—the Downtown entertainment district," Grotelueschen said. "Every time visitors from out of town have a positive Champaign experience, the community benefits."

T.J. Blakeman, a city of Champaign planner and executive director of the Champaign Center Partnership, agrees that the hotel will be beneficial for Downtown businesses.

"The hotel represents a major step forward for

Downtown," Blakeman said. "It has the potential to drastically increase our foot traffic and bring guests right into the heart of Downtown, which is good for our local retailers."

Grotelueschen believes that his hotel will be a perfect complement to the already lively Downtown, and it is being built to emphasize the urban feel of the area. Also, replacing the "Big Hole" with a new, beautiful Downtown business will enhance overall revitalization efforts.

Though Grotelueschen fully believes his project will be a success, he has faced some financial roadblocks in this tough lending environment. Some financial institutions are not allowed by federal regulators to do any real estate development loans, he said.

"My project is held back because of the financial banking sins committed several years ago," Grotelueschen said.

However, Grotelueschen said he's found a lender with the capacity and interest in providing a loan and is hopeful to get financing secure so that ground can be broken on the project this summer, which would allow a completion date of September 2013.

Grotelueschen and many Downtown business owners are excited about the prospect of the new hotel and are looking forward to all it will bring to the area.

"Numerous business owners consider this a

great opportunity to showcase a true gem of our community," Grotelueschen said.

**Midtown is the Missing Link**

Improvements made to the Boneyard Creek area in Midtown were completed about a year and a half ago, and the results have proven that the project was great for the community. The improvements have attracted new developments, and Midtown has become a connector between districts. People can now enjoy a bike ride or jog from Midtown to Downtown Champaign or Campustown in about 10 minutes, with a path the entire length of the journey.

"What was once a detriment to the neighborhood has turned into a strong community asset," Blakeman said. "We hope to see Midtown grow as a much stronger link between all three districts."

But Midtown is much more than just a link in the community. Champaign Center Partnership's major focus for Midtown is to create a new and unique district in and of itself. The plan is to enhance the international and ethnic flair that already exists in the area, while keeping the feel like that of a small neighborhood, rather than the urban vibe felt in Downtown and Campustown.

"There are already ethnic restaurants and grocery stores in Midtown," Blakeman said. "We want to continue to see that world flavor."

There are currently two projects in the works for First Street in Midtown. The first is a new apartment community being built by University Group. The ground floor of the buildings will feature retail and restaurants. Construction on this project is expected to begin next year. In this project, three or four apartment buildings will replace the existing Blue Star convenience store, laundromat, and a house. Renovation is planned also for a nearby apartment building.

The second development is planned to be constructed in the former Jin's Pro Auto Body location. The new construction will feature commercial space and a Japanese restaurant, which will meet Champaign Center Partnership's vision of a global feel for Midtown.

"This kind of development activity was exactly what we were hoping for with the extension of the TIF district and the construction of the Boneyard Creek project," Blakeman said. "These developments will go a long way toward creating a buzz and energy that can fuel the further redevelopment of the Midtown district."

**Campustown is Moving Up and Out**

The University of Illinois supports a never-ending supply of consumers for businesses located in Campustown. To accommodate the traffic and future developments in the area, plans for Campustown include new high-rises and streetscape improvements that will expand the number of businesses and residences up and out across Campustown.

The developers of 309 Green Street, the new 24-story building in the heart of Campustown, are also beginning work on 311 Green Street. The building that once stood on the corner of Green and Fourth streets has been demolished, and

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COMMUNITY *continued from p5*

construction will soon begin on an eight-story building with seven floors of residential space and retail on the ground floor.

City plans for 2014 include redoing the streetscape in Campustown all the way to First Street to encourage new developments and foot traffic farther east.

"Retail is already very strong in Campustown and Downtown, but this will open up a whole new area of development in Campustown," Blakeman said. "Right now, there aren't many vacancies for new retail to fill in either district, so new buildings are important for retailers who want to come in."

**Bringing it All Together in Champaign**

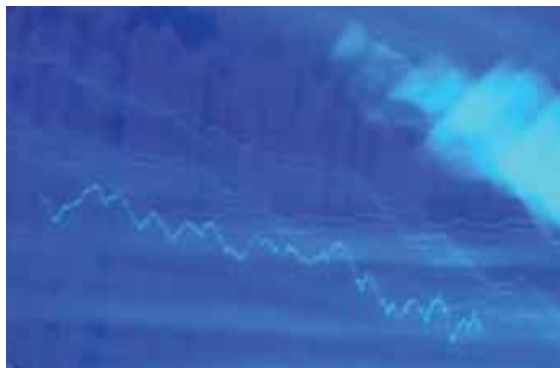
Champaign Center Partnership is the marketing organization that is working to create joint marketing between all three Champaign districts. It began in November 2010 when the Champaign Downtown Association and the Campustown Business Group merged. Champaign Center Partnership is member-driven, and it asks for business membership and corporate sponsorship. This allows the partnership to offer affordable marketing for member businesses under the belief that working together will make independent businesses stronger.

Two of the local marketing campaigns offered by the Champaign Center Partnership are *13 Thursdays* and *University Appreciation Day*. *13 Thursdays* helps draw customers to Campustown during the slower months of summer when students are gone. Businesses in the district are invited to offer special promotions, play music, and create a fun atmosphere in exchange for marketing opportunities, such as radio or tele-

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In addition to day-to-day protection, it's important to have your eyes examined by an optometrist.

"Don't let insurance dictate your health care," Kessler suggested. "If you don't have vision coverage, your eyes are still worth taking care of. It's a minor out of pocket expense that is worth it in the long run."

Kessler also said that those with good health should receive vision exams at least once a year and those with not-so-good health should visit the eye doctor every three months.

"If we're able to catch something early on, there is more success in treating the disease as opposed to letting it run its course," he said. "At that point, it would be more like damage control, rather than prevention." ■

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## COMMUNITY *continued from p13*

vision interviews. *University Appreciation Day* occurs twice a year and allows businesses to attract students and faculty from the University of Illinois by offering discounts and deals.

The Champaign Center Partnership works in many ways to connect local residents and visitors to experiences available within the three unique districts of the city. One of its most recent major efforts, a new mobile app, launched in April and is available for iPhone and Android. The app contains a complete directory of businesses that includes maps and contact information. There are more than 40 perks on the Center City Perks app.

### Growing and Sustaining Urbana

Development activity in Urbana is also robust, said Community Development Director and City Planner Libby Tyler, who listed a number of projects.

"Construction and development is coming back," Tyler said. "The indicator that would lag a little bit would be the single-family residential, but I would hope next year we'll see that starting up again. For now, to see the investment in commercial projects and some

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specialty residential is pretty encouraging.”

Residential projects currently in progress or expected to begin soon include redevelopment of three properties: the former Windsor Swim Club property, which will become Verdant Prairie condominiums, featuring 48 condominiums and a club house; redevelopment of Dunbar Court in north Urbana into Hamilton on the Park; and Nabor House, a reconstruction project of a fraternity house at Iowa Street and Lincoln Avenue.

Tyler pointed out that the renovation of the Urbana Landmark Hotel is moving along well, with expectations of a partial opening later this year. This project is one of several active commercial developments in Urbana, including expansion of the facilities at Community Blood Services of Illinois on University Avenue and the Creative Thermal Solutions campus on Willow Road and Anthony Drive.

“Getting the hotel up and running is important to the city. It can add vibrancy to the Downtown,” Tyler said. “The blood bank expansion is very nice, and the Creative Thermal Solutions project is part of a pretty cool high-tech research park. The original building has been open for a few years and now they’re expanding to eventually have five buildings.”

The largest commercial project underway in Urbana is the final phase of Carle Foundation Hospital’s campus modernization on University Avenue. Begun in 2011, the project is expected to be completed in 2013 and will offer a new nine-story, 390,000-square-foot tower that will consolidate vital services and house a state-of-the-art Heart and Vascular Institute.

“It’s a huge addition at Carle. It really dwarfs anything else,” Tyler said.

On the public side of development, projects include construction of the Crystal Lake outdoor aquatic center, expected to be ready for use in 2013, and construction of the Early Childhood Education Center on Washington Street.

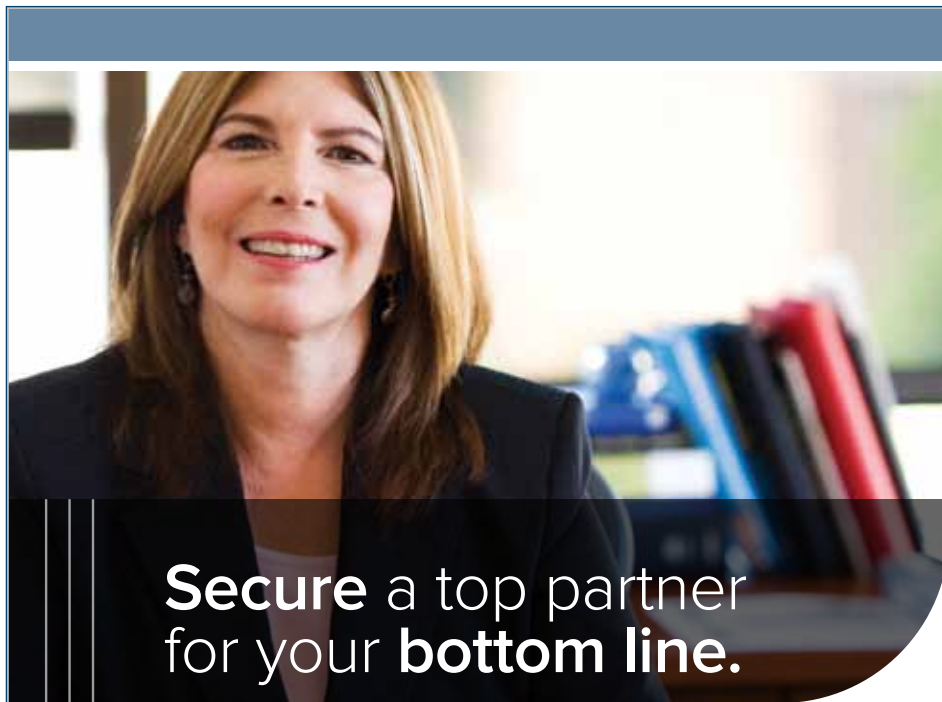
Tyler said the range of projects is significant in providing local jobs and high-quality amenities for the community.

“I think we have a nice, well-rounded selection of projects,” she said. “When people look to buy or relocate, they look for a place that has really great education facilities, housing choices, recreation facilities. I would say that this group of projects is really important.”

While new construction and renovation is essential to community vibrancy, creating and sustaining a climate of business strength in Urbana is something Cynthia Johnson, executive director at the Urbana Business Association, takes seriously.

“We’re trying to create more awareness of things that are going on in Downtown Urbana and other parts of the city and keep it in front of people, whether it’s a sale at a business or a band performance at a bar,” Johnson said. “We’re using social media for that and finding that’s a great way to get out the word. It’s obviously a free way, so it’s not something that would be a financial burden to the UBA or any of the area businesses.”

Johnson said UBA events, such as the *Urbana Sweetcorn Festival*, also generate dollars for local businesses and help support a sense of community. ■



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