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Downtown Development—Whoa! And yikes!

BY JEFF VONKAENEL / jeffv@newsreview.com

Each year for the last 21 years, several hundred developers, elected officials, government employees and other interested parties have gathered for an expensive breakfast to hear about the State of Downtown. I have attended many of these breakfasts, like the one held January 22 at the Hyatt Regency in downtown Sacramento.

Over the last two decades, we have heard about many plans for developing downtown; some were eventually completed, and some were not. We heard about the new arena, the problems of the homeless living on Sacramento's streets, the exciting potential of the railyards, the disappointing realities of the railyards, the need to attract the creative class and numerous other issues. The mayor nearly always speaks. And each year we watch increasingly sophisticated videos that could make any place look cool.

But this year's State of Downtown was different.

Michael Ault, the longtime Downtown Sacramento Partnership's executive director, described the 60-plus developments that have recently been completed or are under construction or in the planning stages. This includes the 200,000-square-foot Kaiser Permanente Downtown Commons Medical Offices, the 838,000-square-foot state Natural Resources headquarters, the 43,000-square-foot Powerhouse Science Center and the 250,000-square-foot Hardin mixed-use project on the 700 block of K Street. Ault's map of downtown looks like a lawn with a dandelion problem, but all the dandelions are new buildings.

And then there's the railyards. The 240-acre site will soon have a massive new Sacramento County Courthouse, a gigantic Kaiser Permanente medical complex and, if things go right, a privately-financed Sacramento Republic FC soccer stadium.

Mayor Darrell Steinberg, making these announcements, sounded a lot like an eight-year-old boy opening his birthday present—the long-desired train set—and discovering all the train cars are filled with silver dollars.

It's an incredible list of projects. But there may be a dark side.

Kate Joncas, the former Downtown Seattle Association CEO, spoke at the breakfast about how being in a hot real estate market with massive job growth, while desirable, also presents problems, including increased housing costs and transportation bottlenecks.

Joncas mentioned New York, San Francisco and Seattle, where so much of the job growth has been driven by over-paid, mostly male tech workers, creating an inbred geek culture. In Sacramento, we do have somewhat of a cultural safety net with our large number of state workers, roughly split between male and female, who are certainly much more enjoyable as neighbors than techie bros.

Nevertheless, with Sacramento now on the list of hot cities for development, we should not repeat those other cities' mistakes. While it is encouraging to see more downtown housing, the amount is not enough for the increased numbers of people who will be coming into downtown every day, who will put greater demands on our transit system.

We will need to give Regional Transit additional funds to build the transportation infrastructure to accommodate the increased number of people living, working and playing downtown.

Twenty-one years from now, at the 2040 State of Downtown breakfast, our current decisions about housing, transportation and development will likely be featured in a state-of-the-art video.

I hope we look good. ☐

Jeff vonKaenel is the president, CEO and majority owner of the News & Review.