

DOWNTOWN NIGHT LIFE GONE FOREVER?

ST. PAUL'S CORE WAS ONCE A VIGOROUS SCENE OF TAVERNS AND RESTAURANTS -- IT'S QUIETER NOW. BUT THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING DOWNTOWN HAS TRIPLED, STOKING HOPE FOR A REVIVAL.

By Tad Vezner
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There used to be dancing. Three places you could dance, right downtown. Bob Hope got lost, asked a stranger on the street for a dime to make a phone call. Never carried cash. Tony Bennett sang at Mancini's.

The stories of St. Paul's once-boisterous bar scene are still floating around, a generation old. Many wonder where they went -- the smoky neighborhood taverns, the rowdy lunch crowds, the oak-paneled clubs with a million memories.

"We used to concentrate on alcohol -- drinking, drinking, drinking. It's a tough nut. ... It's gone," said Mike Fish, whose family has run a downtown neighborhood bar for 23 years.

His family-owned bar, the Top Hat -- renamed the Hat Trick, since the Minnesota Wild rolled in -- used to do 75 lunches a day: blue-collar workers with money from the offices of Burlington Northern. But in the early 1990s, he saw his lunch crowd die as St. Paul's tavern culture changed.

"Now we have to do this entertainment thing. All of a sudden we're faced with the prospect of night-time entertainment, music," added Fish, who also sits on downtown's district council. "All of a sudden you gotta look for new customers."

As a whole, downtown is trying to adapt, without always succeeding. Fish's biggest competition, The Buttery -- open since 1976 -- closed last year. Add that to the high-profile shutterings of Fhima's and Margaux, and it raises the simple question:

Is St. Paul's downtown bar and restaurant scene a thing of the past?

VITAL SIGNS

Historically, some statistics are daunting: Over recent decades, the number of new bars and restaurants attempting to open in downtown St. Paul has dwindled -- from more than 40 new bars and restaurants applying for licenses in 1985 to less than 20 a year by the end of the millennium. Since then, the total number of

bars and restaurants in the downtown area's ZIP codes had dropped by about a dozen as of 2005 -- the most recent state tally.

A loss of large employers, pedestrian traffic and downtown employees over that time hit tavern owners hard, many note, clearing streets where, in the 1970s, patrons walked bar to bar. Many remember how just a decade ago, the city tried to cash in its historic character for the glitz across the river: A trio of massive but ill-fated retail projects failed to bring shoppers and employees back to the barstools.

But other statistics -- particularly within the past decade -- reveal vital signs, rather than death throes.

Tax revenue from bars and restaurants in the downtown area has risen significantly in the past decade, and the new Xcel Energy Center -- on certain nights, at least -- brings in crowds to rival the glory days of the 1970s and 1980s.

Since 2000, the number of applications for new bar and restaurant licenses downtown has ceased to decline -- though it remains in the teens, sparking debate as to whether it's a sign of reversal or simply St. Paul hitting bottom. Finally, city officials point to one statistic that shines above all. The number of people living downtown has tripled in a generation, remaking the character of downtown -- and offering hope for after-hours haunts, many believe.

There's plenty of work to do: Many established bar and tavern owners have altered their venues in an effort to draw the newcomers in -- by adding music, altering acts or changing the little things.

"We're gradually taking down the beer signs. It seems to be working out," said Fish, who recently added live music at the bar on weekends.

"The downtown is evolving, and what used to be no longer exists," said Patrick Seeb, head of the St. Paul Riverfront Corp.

"It wasn't that many years ago that there wouldn't have been so many restaurants to close anyway," he said, referring to closings of recent decades. City Council Member Dave Thune, who represents the downtown district, agrees the scene is evolving.

"We've got a different type of night life now. ... I think we've got more live music downtown than we have had in 20 years." He ticks off jazz nights at the Downtowner, Matty B's, the Black Dog Coffee and Wine Bar. Here and there, a new establishment has crept in.

"We try to be what people expect from the downtown experience," said Bill Collins, owner of the newest nightclub, Camp -- a gay venue that is the first downtown spot in a while where patrons can go dancing.

"(In the suburbs) you're certainly not going to get a black drag queen," he adds. But change -- and all the rewards that come with it -- is eyed warily by the denizens of a city with deep roots and an identity dating to the time of an 1830s bootlegger named Pig's Eye Parrant. Many firmly believe that if the city is to return to the happening days when Hope roamed the streets, any turnaround must mesh with the personality of old St. Paul.

OLD AND NEW

Ron Maddox is booking bands. He's an old hand at it: Decades ago, he owned no less than six St. Paul bars, all of them downtown.

"Lenny Kravitz? Who's he?" he asks his daughter, who's highlighted a dozen names on a three-page list for the Taste of Minnesota, which Maddox founded and still runs. "Blues Travelers?"

Maddox likes Chicago, the Doobie Brothers, and Earth, Wind and Fire. On a drive through the heart of downtown, Maddox ticks off 19 nightspots that existed in the late 1970s and 1980s, including four of his own. A generation ago, he hosted Hope at the Green Lantern, on Cedar Street. Retired fire trucks and Winnebagos drove patrons bar to bar. Many remember city officials and politicians meeting at Gallivan's, where Matty B's is now, and legislators and lobbyists staking out a variety of downtown hotel dining rooms and bars.

Maddox focuses on the Oz -- a Wabasha Street disco -- and looks wistful, remembering the crowds, the energy.

"We had I don't know how many bars where you could actually have dancing," he said.

If he had the chance, he says, he'd buy an old-time neighborhood bar. A place where you could watch sports or talk about the war with your neighbor. That's St. Paul, he believes. Always will be.

"St. Paul is a neighborhood city -- it's not a plastic city. If you promote St. Paul for what it is, rather than what you want it to be, it'll come alive. It's not going to be First Avenue -- it's going to be the Haberdashery (a St. Peter Street tailor with classic charm). We're heavy on antiques -- let's promote 'em."

But then Maddox contradicts himself, offering both sides of an argument echoed across the city.

"We can talk about St. Paul being a great historic marker, but that's not what sells the city," he said. You need the energy, creativity and excitement to stand tall against Bloomington and Minneapolis, he says.

St. Paul's inherent conflict -- being a historic, family-oriented, neighborhood town but desiring an active night life -- is something Cecile Bedor, head of the city's Department of Planning and Economic Development, has sensed since she started her job almost two years ago. She maintains its historic identity will always be its strength and selling point.

"St. Paul needs to celebrate being itself -- we shouldn't try to be another city," she says.

People remember when the bar industry withered in the 1990s because of the simple subtraction of available patrons.

"The main core of good-paying blue-collar jobs are gone. That's 50 percent of the problem," said Fish, remembering workers from Gillette Co. and Burlington Northern piling into the Top Hat when he first bought it. "It was a change in the culture. ... All these guys hung around the bars. It was their life, and they're gone."

According to statistics from Minnesota's Department of Employment and Economic Development, the two ZIP codes covering downtown lost 14 percent of their private work force from 1987 to 2006, with the biggest drops in the early 1990s. (Both ZIP codes -- 55101 and 55102 -- stretch beyond the downtown district's boundaries.)

The 55101 ZIP code -- covering everything downtown east of Wabasha Street -- was hardest hit, losing more than a third of its private work force over the past two decades.

An attempt to bring back foot traffic and, in turn, patrons, failed. Three glitzy ground-zeros of retail -- the World Trade Center, Galtier Plaza and Town Square -- all opened with fanfare, then gradually gutted their shopping spaces, leaving deal-makers skittish about such ventures.

"St. Paul always had this inferiority complex, which was taken advantage of politically. We wanted to attract stuff, glitzy stuff to make it seem like a renaissance," said John Mannillo, a former mayoral candidate who owned four buildings downtown and chairs the Downtown Building Owners Association and Friends of Mears Park.

From the mid-1980s to late 1990s, retail space in downtown St. Paul shrank from

750,000 square feet to 466,000 square feet, according to United Properties. In turn, pedestrian traffic suffered, according to 20-year studies by **Peter Bruce**, president of Minneapolis-based Community Enhancement/**Pedestrian Studies**. At what **Bruce** called a "bellwether location for vitality downtown" -- the skyway bridge from what was then the World Trade Center to Town Square -- daily foot traffic dipped from 15,000 trips in 1988 through 1991 to the 9,000-range about a decade later.

Other core downtown locations mimicked the trend, **Bruce** said.

CHANGE OF CULTURE

The decline of daytime traffic was more than a loss of patrons -- it was loss of a piece of St. Paul, some say.

"The tavern culture, where you have Norm at the end of the bar -- that is St. Paul," Mannillo said.

Eventually the two-beer/martini lunch became passe.

"People are drinking less," Thune said. "The days of it being acceptable behavior to get sloshed are over."

St. Paul's strip-club era -- replete with "noon nightie shows" -- lasted into the 1980s.

Entrepreneurs whose afternoon business far outweighed what they pulled in at night were forced eventually to shift focus.

Mannillo pointed to one bar that served pigs in a blanket -- hot dogs wrapped in biscuits -- for lunch. It's closed.

"It was smoky; it was old," Mannillo said. "People didn't want to go in there because it was too smoky."

Fighting words: St. Paul's smoking ban is still fresh on tavern owners' lips. But that was a recent lament. Start talking theory, and most city leaders and restaurateurs offer at least one about the decline -- everything from the dramshop laws that made bar owners liable for intoxicated patrons to carpool lanes and buses whisking people back home after an Xcel event.

Following a jump in the allowable number of liquor licenses in 1985, more than 40 new bars and restaurants applied for licenses in the downtown district, according to data from the city's Department of Safety and Inspections. By the late 1990s, after some highs and lows, the number of new establishments applying for liquor, restaurant or entertainment licenses annually had dropped to

the teens.

ACTION ON THE FRINGE

But now, the status quo of St. Paul is shaken. An area just outside the official downtown district -- West Seventh Street -- has reaped great rewards from the crowds brought in by the Xcel Center, in addition to attendance brought by Roy Wilkins Auditorium and St. Paul RiverCentre. Those nighttime crowds have hit heady highs in the last couple of years, topping 2 million annually. The last time the campus, which included the old Civic Center, reached that kind of level was in the early 1990s.

Taxable sales from bars and restaurants in downtown ZIP codes jumped significantly with the opening of the Xcel Center -- from \$88 million in 1998 to \$117 million in 2005, after adjusting for inflation. Just outside the downtown district's edge, on West Seventh Street, a new night district is thriving.

Still, in the heart of downtown, the crowds from Xcel -- when they come -- are sporadic, many bar owners note. On off nights it's easy to park your car -- and even on game nights, patrons rarely reach Lowertown.

"Why don't people wander east (after a Wild game)? It's dark, they're not parked there -- and how do you get there?" Thune said.

St. Paul police Sgt. Paul Paulos has been patrolling the downtown at night, on and off, for 15 years. Born and raised in the city, he remembers the heyday of the 1970s and 1980s and laments the loss.

Paulos often has to help tourists find something as simple as a place to get a burger. He's got plenty of places to suggest for food -- but often struggles when asked whether there's anywhere to dance.

"We do our best with what we have," he said.

Event crowds typically clear out a half-hour after games let out, police officials note.

The change -- and any sort of salvation, Thune and others believe -- must come from a more stable base.

From those who call the downtown district home.

DOWNTOWN RESIDENTS: THE NEW BARFLIES?

By even the most pessimistic measure, St. Paul's downtown populace is on the rise. Vacant office space gradually transformed into condominiums, and,

according to the U.S. census, those condominiums have been filling. From 1970 to 2000, downtown St. Paul's population jumped from 2,000 mostly low-income and elderly residents to a 5,700-strong mixed demographic. Since 2000, the number has jumped by another 600 to 1,700, depending on whose estimates you consider.

And supporters of the entertainment industry are eyeing those numbers as the nexus of their new business model.

"In the past, the 'mall model' focused on bringing outsiders downtown," said Bob Spaulding, a CapitolRiver Council board member who researches downtown living. "Now, the push is for housing units to drive expansion of downtown entertainment."

"We are a city of neighborhoods, and downtown is now becoming its own neighborhood," Bedor said.

Many residents are becoming impatient for some essentials -- a movie theater, a grocery store and, of course, more night life.

"Probably the largest concern or desire was the after hours. ... Both residents and workers liked the restaurants but thought too many were high-end, not geared for families," said Janet Pool, of JH Pool Consulting, which conducted a 2005 survey of downtown employees and residents for St. Paul's Capital City Partnership.

Seeb, of the Riverfront Corp., has been measuring the baby steps. There are more than a half-dozen new coffee shops downtown, he notes.

Still, he said: "You have to get a certain critical mass. We're not there yet. ... As much as you'd like to, you can't force it. It's frustrating in the meantime."

Joe Spencer, who works in the mayor's office as an arts and culture policy associate, thinks otherwise.

"The critical mass of audiences (now) is people that live downtown," he said. "We have that base now."

Others wonder whether a burgeoning populace -- which at some point requires sleep -- might conflict with neighborhood businesses that remain open and active until 2 a.m.

"We're seeing the same kind of conflicts downtown as we are in residential," said Bob Kessler, head of the city's department of safety and inspections.

The old Trikkx Nightclub -- in the Rossmor building, where Camp now sits -- had

pipes running from its bar into the apartments upstairs, leading to a bitter battle between residents and the bar's owner. Collins, of Camp, noted that "people on the fourth or fifth floor said their shelves were shaking," and has since added insulation.

But with that exception, Spaulding, of the district council, said co-op leaders and residents he hears from are fairly single-minded about even the loudest Mears Park concerts: "They're happy to have a little loudness in the evening in exchange for a vibrant downtown."

After 2000, foot traffic has continued to dip on **Bruce's** "bellwether" skyway -- down to the lower 7,000 range. But this past year, **Bruce** saw encouraging signs for the first time in a while: a 7 percent average increase in pedestrian traffic at the five skyway locations his "clickers" staked out (he wasn't hired to do any sidewalk studies, he notes). The "bellwether" spot measured in the upper 7,000 range.

Collins, with the optimism of a new businessman, claims many of his new customers express shock when they show up at Camp.

"The perception is it's all these restaurants sitting empty," he said. "We've had so many people come from Minneapolis and say, 'I had no idea.'"

Next door to Camp, the Margaux space has picked up a new tenant -- Sawatdee, a Thai restaurant. But across town, the former Fhima's space remains vacant. Sgt. Paulos, who talks with bar owners every week, is jaded but hopeful: "I've seen it come from a very vibrant, prosperous town to an area that's either trying to survive or revive.

"I'm all for pumping it up -- and I hope they turn it around before it gets too far out there that they can't."

MaryJo Webster contributed to this report.