



## **Making connections**

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While winter bears down on bundled-up pedestrians in downtown Fargo, others walk in coatless comfort two stories above the sidewalks.

However, unless you walk in the cityowned skyway for exercise or work in an adjoining office building, you might not have discovered the little city within the city.

The wide, windowed walkway winds from the Civic Center and City Hall on Fourth Street to Elm Tree Square on Broadway.

A few businesses, such as Beverly's Hair Studio, have their only entrance on the skyway.

Walkers, some solo, some in groups, come in waves. Their feet pad quietly on carpet so new a faint smell still lingers.

Many wear nametags from businesses in buildings connected to the skywalks. MeritCare, for example, encourages employees in a connected building to exercise on their breaks.

"It's kind of like a little family up here. You usually see the same walkers, the same maintenance people," said Leah Pochant, a job coach for the Vocational Training Center, which helps people with developmental disabilities hold jobs. Vocational Training Center clients clean the skyway each morning.

Many walkers are MeritCare employees who took part in a wellness program last fall. In part, the program encouraged the employees to get more exercise, so they took to the skyway, which connects to the MeritCare Annex at Fifth Street and Third Avenue North.

The program ended in November, but the employees are still exercising.

"They love it because of the convenience, the climate control," said Laura Alderman, an exercise physiologist who coordinated the program.

Fargo conceived the skyway in the early 1980s to boost the Radisson hotel and office tower. At the time, the \$13 million project was the largest in downtown Fargo.

"Part of the request with this hotel was it had to be connected to the downtown with more than just by street sidewalk," said Pat Zavoral, now Fargo's city administrator.

A study completed by the Metropolitan Council of Governments in 1982 found more reasons to build a skyway:

- Pedestrians and vehicles conflicted at downtown intersections.
- The city committed to revitalizing the central business district, which had experienced a significant decline in commercial and retail activity.
- Fargo winters are long, cold and windy. Fargoans wouldn't shop at downtown retail establishments in the cold, the study said. Instead they drove to the western fringe of the city and shopped in an enclosed mall.

“The answer to these

problems in most people’s minds is to find a way to protect pedestrian traffic from the elements,” study authors wrote.

The city sought easements from building owners for the project. It set up a special assessment district and persuaded the North Dakota Department of Transportation to chip in federal highway money for the project.

It took a year and a half to two years to design and build, Zavoral said.

And so the skyway was born, making Fargo one of a number of cities across the nation that provide shelter for downtown pedestrians.

Nationwide, cities debate whether skyways are beneficial or whether they just take pedestrians away from the sidewalks.

Dave Anderson’s view is somewhere in the middle.

“It kind of depends on how they’re designed and how they work,” he said. “This system is small enough that I don’t think there’s a great impact.”

Judging by requests for expansion over the years, the skyway proved popular.

Some wanted a connection to the federal building, Zavoral said. Others suggested an enclosed walkway to MeritCare on the north edge of downtown.

Another proposal would

have connected the skyway to the Bank of the West building south of Main Avenue.

None worked, though Fargo would be willing if the right opportunity arose, Zavoral said.

City leaders should act carefully if they ever decide to expand the skyway, said both Anderson and Peter Bruce, a Twin Cities consultant who works closely skyways.

“You should be able to keep your retail in about a two-tothree block area,” Bruce said. “If you built skyways that competed with that, you would endanger the sidewalk vitality.”

Zavoral said the most likely scenario would be private businesses building connectors rather than another city project.

Sidewalks and skyways can coexist, he said. “I think the more people you get downtown, the more activity you’ll have, so why can’t you have both?” he said. Readers can reach Forum reporter Andrea Domaskin at (701) 241-5556