FRESNO'S IS IMPROVING, TRENTON'S IS A FLOP

Do costly downtown shopping malls revitalize the inner city?

By DAVID L. LANGFORD

Mayor W. Donald Schaefer rubbed the toe of his shoe on a large oriental rug underneath three massive chandliers in the refurbished ceremonial room of Baltimore's 101-year-old city hall.

"You're sitting on a $25,000 rug," He bragged to his visitor.

"Not one person criticized that rug when we remodeled this room.

"There's a new attitude in Baltimore. There's pride.

"Baltimorians used to apologize for being Baltimorians. We don't do that anymore."

Schaefer's rug is a symbol of that renewed civic pride manifested in an ambitious and expensive program to spruce up the old Maryland city and lure people back downtown. Baltimore, like many other cities, is revitalizing scruffy inner city areas with pleasant pedestrian malls.

That $25,000 rug is a trifle when the Greater Baltimore Committee, an organization of business executives, unfolds its plans for the $210 million Lexington Square Mall, a shoppers promenade, and a $25 million downtown people mover, a 1.5-mile elevated railway much like the monralls at Disneyworld.

Pedestrian malls of varying size and cost have been built in many cities. Even troubled New York on enough federal money, City, if it can get its hands on enough federal money, has plans to convert a seedy section of Times Square into a pedestrian mall.

The first city in the nation to construct a downtown pedestrian mall has seen mixed results.

Fresno, Calif., opened its six-block downtown mall on Fulton Street in September, 1964. It is lush, with fountains, ponds and rivulets throughout. Trellises and trees shade sitting areas and playgrounds. A slow-speed tramway runs the length of the mall.

City officials declared the project a huge success, until 1974, when several large stores moved to outlying shopping centers.

The city, in cooperation with the Downtown Association, fought back in 1975 with the opening of free parking lots in the area surrounding the Fulton Street Mall. That helped. By the third quarter of 1976 downtown merchants were reporting retail sales up.

In 1976 several new stores opened in the mall, with only one moving out. On the whole, officials are optimistic the renewed upswing will continue.

If Fresno suffered some setbacks, another pioneer mall is hailed as an unqualified success.

The downtown business community in Minneapolis built and paid for the eight-block Nicollet Mall which opened in 1967 at a cost of $3.8 million.

It features glass-covered bridges and overhead pedestrian "streets" which run through stores and other buildings for cold-weather shopping.

"The mall has created a great deal of interest in downtown Minneapolis and has greatly exceeded the expectations of the business community," said Tom Duffee, assistant director of the downtown council.

The picture is less bright in Trenton, N.J., which built a $1.6 million mall on East State street in 1973.

The New Jersey capital, like many other cities, has inadequate parking downtown. It also has a crime problem which keeps shoppers away at night.

The two-block mall, called Trenton Commons, so far has not done much to help the declining heart of town. There were 10 vacant stores in the area when the mall opened four years ago. Today there are more.

"The mall probably has not attracted more shoppers," said James Ort, executive director of the Trenton Commons Commission, a city agency. "But Trenton Commons has made the shopping area more appealing to the people ye already have."

Ort is confident that with the city building 500 new parking places — offering two hours of free time — there will be an eventual upturn in the Trenton Commons market.

Back in Baltimore, the kid Mayor Schaefer about his "fish tank," a $15 million aquarium the financing, half from the sale to the state of the old Friendship Airport.

But the mayor, 22 years in Baltimore city government, sees his fish tank as a showplace in the inner harbor where derelict wharves and warehouses have been torn down to make way for public parks.

The newly restored frigate "Constellation" is tied up at a pier for visitors to look at.

"That inner harbor now belongs to the people," Schaefer said. "It's beautiful."

The mayor also bragged about the Morris Mechanic Theatre in Charles Center, the development completed in 1967 in the heart of the city with its elevated walkways linking glass front office buildings with new store buildings.

J. Joseph Clarke, associate executive director of the Greater Baltimore committee, said a new subway system being built from the Charles Center to the northwest corner of the city eventually would be joined by a commuter train system operating on track which fell into disuse.

Clarke is still looking for financing for his pet project, the People ... he said monorail cars carrying 12 to 28 passengers would arrive at one of nine stations every one to two minutes and make the 1.6 mile run through the heart of town in nine minutes.

But mainly, he wants to get the Lexington Square project off the ground.

COLONEL GEORGE M. BROOKS, 2318 Longwood St., Commander of the 29th Support Center, RAO, Maryland Army National Guard, Pikesville State Armory, Pikesville, was awarded the State of Maryland Distinguished Service Gross by the Governor of Maryland. The medal was presented by the Assistant Adjutant General of Maryland, Brigadeir General Benjamin F. Dean.

NOTICE

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