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Oregon City is hoping to be discovered again

The blue-collar city of grit and history wants to attract the young and talented with excitement and vitality

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OREGON CITY -- City officials hope their town at the end of the Oregon Trail is about to be discovered by a new band of pioneers.

Robb Crocker, 31, recently paid about \$1 million for two small buildings in the heart of Oregon City's underdeveloped downtown. He plans to move his Portland film and video production company, funnelbox, into one of the buildings in November and share space with two other media companies.

He hopes to lease part of the other building -- at the foot of the picturesque bridge connecting the city with West Linn -- to a high-end restaurant.

Oregon City's low-priced historic buildings could become a magnet for creative businesses, Crocker said. "We see a lot of potential there."

So does Oregon City.

A small pool of film, advertising and Web design businesses coupled with good restaurants and bars could convert the Oregon City's down-at-the-heel downtown to an outpost of creative cool.

"It's not there yet, but if we can get some creative companies interested in that area, it can turn around pretty quickly," Crocker said.

"To have attracted the Young Creatives is a coup for the city," said Mayor Alice Norris, who has taken a direct role in recruiting new businesses and investment.

"Young Creatives" refers to a desirable demographic: talented 25- to 34-year-olds who can add vitality to a city and its economy.

Oregon City has rezoned the downtown for mixed-use projects that could include housing above the ground level, hoping to energize the area and attract a wider mix of businesses.

"We are approaching critical mass," Norris said. Recent public investment in parks, streets and beautification projects and investments by a few commercial developers are generating a buzz about opportunities in Oregon City, she said.

Downtown Oregon City hadn't seen much development to attract young adults since McMenamins converted a Depression-era church to a pub 10 years ago.

In recent months, Redside Equities, a Portland developer, turned a bland Main Street building into a colorful office-retail site that is now 96 percent occupied.

Oregon City "is an attractive place that needs the dust blown off it," said Danny McGinley of Redside Equities.

In a town as small as Oregon City, it doesn't take a huge infusion to shift the downtown dynamic.

Oregon City's historic riverfront downtown covers about eight blocks. The area's appeal is offset by a lack of parking, but the city plans to build a parking garage one day.

Unlike downtown Portland and its urbane Pearl District, Oregon City offers the grit and color of a blue-collar small town. A sprawling paper mill and a working man's bar anchor one end of Main Street. A Depression-era brick courthouse generates most of the downtown foot traffic.

Upscale shops and restaurants are absent.

Until last year, Clackamas County occupied a large amount of Oregon City's downtown office space. Then the county relocated its downtown employees to a new building across town, leaving empty spaces cast as opportunities.

"It has a long way to go," Crocker acknowledged. "You definitely have to have a vision."

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