

How the downtown area should keep on growing

Salt Lake City has a downtown area that is certainly going places.

Until a few years ago, the place the downtown area was going was steadily downhill, as urban decay eroded property values while merchants and shoppers fled to the suburbs.

But the turnaround started when the construction of the Salt Palace was followed by a downtown building boom that has included malls, hotels, and public facilities like the concert hall.

More recently, this boom has come to include a number of complexes containing not only commercial establishments but also new high-density residences in the heart of the downtown area.

The latest such addition to this part of the effort to make the downtown area a better place to work and live can be seen in the preliminary plans outlined this week for developing five blocks around Pioneer Park.

These particular plans include between 840 and 1,050 new housing units in about 25 buildings plus new landscaping, footpaths, and commercial-retail outlets.

Like a few other recent developments in the downtown area, this one would be partly subsidized by local taxpayers. Such tax increment proposals, as they are called, pay off because the resulting development strengthens the city's tax base and ultimately generates new revenue.

There's a limit to how many such projects the taxpayers should be expected to help finance at any given time. But clearly the redevelopment project proposed in the Pioneer Park area is not the place to draw the line.

The housing contemplated for this particular project includes units in the middle-income range. That's important if the downtown area, as a residential location, is not to become just an enclave for the affluent and a ghetto for the poor. A better mix is essential to a healthy community.

Also, downtown development can proceed in a more uniform and orderly manner if several blocks are improved and redeveloped all at once rather than doing the job piecemeal.

The proximity of this particular project to the park and to the D&RG and Union Pacific depots should make the proposed new complex especially desirable.

Moreover, like other such projects, anything that gets more people to live in the downtown area helps downtown merchants, fights urban sprawl, generates other downtown improvements, and saves energy by curtailing long commuting trips.

In brief, the proposed redevelopment project around Pioneer Park reflects an encouraging trend. Salt Lake City can keep growing not just by spilling outward but by growing inward and upward with downtown high-rises.