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More thoughts on Downtown retail, Grand Avenue
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Downtown retail is a hot topic.

Milwaukee Talkie, the blog of the Public Policy Forum, examined the urban retail market and how to best utilize the hiring of Deanna Inniss as a business recruiter by BID #21, Milwaukee's Downtown Business Improvement District. It noted that one large thing wasn't on her task list: the inside of Grand Avenue Mall.

Looking at Minneapolis, Melissa Kovach observes that even with a light-rail line, nearby sporting events and anchor tenants, the urban mall, Block E, still has a vacancy rate equivalent to Grand Avenue's (30 percent).

The way to a healthy urban retail environment proposed by the Public Policy Forum is to focus on unique, independent retailers at the street-level. Words of wisdom that sound similar to what we concluded when UrbanMilwaukee.com explored the idea of rebuilding the Shops of Grand Avenue.

It's great to see more and more people coming around to the idea that an urban shopping center that is simply a clone of the suburbs will fail.

What survives? Look at the Delmar Loop in St. Louis. An urban neighborhood served by a light-rail line, with good urban, street-level design. Every time I visit the area, it seems to grow bigger and healthier.

What do we have to look at locally? The Historic Third Ward. No fixed transit connections, but it is served by two bus lines. Most importantly, though, is the extensive network of street-level retail establishments with offices and condos above.

Good urban design grows upon itself, unlike a stationary mall. This is no more evident than in the growth of the Fifth Ward where retail, offices, and condos are spilling over from the Third Ward.

The Fifth Ward, officially known as Walker's Point, is located just south of the Third Ward, and has seen projects like South Water Works spring up over the past year, and now Riviana appears to be moving forward again even in a down economy.

There is also the East Side concept of dorm-oriented development that appears to be taking hold.

By bringing in Inniss as a recruiter and taking the inside of Grand Avenue off of her plate, she is poised to build off the success of the Third Ward and spread that unique urban shopping experience to the rest of Downtown.

Godspeed to Deanna, and kudos to BID #21 for bringing her in and not saddling her with baggage of bad ideas past.

Web address:

<http://www.onmilwaukee.com/articles/moregrandaveblog.html>