



## **AURORA DOWNTOWN QUARTERLY MEMBERSHIP UPDATE**

**FEBRUARY 1, 2009**

### **MAYOR'S AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN DOWNTOWN PROPERTY IMPROVEMENTS**

At the Aurora Downtown Annual Meeting and Breakfast on Thursday, December 4, 2008, Mayor Tom Weisner and Don Truax, Chair of the FoxWalk Overlay District Design Review Committee, presented awards for the property improvements described below.

*Trinity Episcopal Church, 218 E. Benton Street, Robert L. Borchert III and Reverend Charles DeKay:* In 1837, the Trinity Episcopal congregation in Aurora was formed. The group constructed a limestone church at 218 E. Benton Street in 1872. It is one of the oldest structures in downtown Aurora. Work completed in 2008 included restoration of the church's historic rose window, installation of storm windows, restoration of masonry, replacement of the roof, and painting of the exterior of the parish hall.

*Fox Theatre, 28 E. Downer Place, Aurora Civic Center Authority, Diana Martinez and Dave Natchke:* The building at 28 E. Downer Place was constructed in 1919, as part of a complex known as the Fox Theatre. The property had been purchased by a private developer in the 1980s but never rehabilitated. It had deteriorated to the point where many of the interior floors and ceilings had collapsed. In 2003, the Aurora Civic Center Authority acquired the building. In conjunction with the construction of the Paramount Theatre addition in 2006, ACCA undertook a full restoration of the building adjacent to the Riverwalk. The historic Fox Theatre Promenade sign on the east elevation of the building was restored in 2008 as part of the redevelopment project.

*La France Bakery, 118 E. Galena Boulevard, Rene Martinez, Silvano Martinez, and Genaro Garcia:* In 2007, Mr. Garcia and the Martinez brothers purchased this building, and spent the next year transforming it from a nondescript one-story commercial building to a space filled with crystal chandeliers, marble tiles, and fresh bakery goods. During warm weather months, the bakery features an outdoor sidewalk café. Indoors, all year long, customers will find bistro tables, china, and beautiful season decorations.

*Balderas Beauty Salon, 25 N. Broadway, Clara and Marco Diaz:* Clara and Marco Diaz purchased the building at 25 N. Broadway in 2006. Clara had been employed as a

hairdresser at Balderas Beauty Salon for many years. She purchased the business, then bought the building and moved her family to the upstairs apartment. Since Mr. and Mrs. Diaz have owned the building, they have undertaken a restoration of the façade, removing dated siding, installing a new storefront system, lighting, and windows. The decorative cornice has been painted to complete the vintage appearance of their property.

*Grand Army of the Republic Memorial Hall, 23 E. Downer Place, The Aurora Preservation Commission (Jan Mangers), The Aurora Public Art Commission (Rena Church), The GAR Commission (Jo Fredell Higgins), The City of Aurora Community Development Department (John Curley):* In Aurora, citizens raised the money to build a soldier's memorial for the Civil War veterans, and in 1877 built the GAR building at a cost of \$7,187.54. It is one of Aurora's most widely recognized historic landmarks, and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Constructed of locally quarried limestone, it is designed in the Gothic Revival style with pointed arched windows, and octagon plan. In 1904, an addition for a banquet hall, meeting room, and entrance tower was completed.

By 1885, the Library's need for expansion was evident. An addition was built onto the southern end of the building in 1885-1886. The GAR building served as the City's Public Library until 1904 when its new home was built on the south end of Stolp Island. The existing tower was built in 1904, when the Veterans resumed use of the building after the Library relocated.

In the early 1960s, the city of Aurora planned to demolish the GAR building to make room for additional parking, but public outcry saved the original portion of the building. Although the 1885 addition was demolished, the 1904 tower with its castle-like profile also survived. The Foxboro, Massachusetts "twin" of the Aurora GAR Memorial is also still standing.

The building is in the midst of a complete restoration, which includes structural stabilization, restoration of the art glass windows, limestone repairs, roof cresting, new copper gutters, flashing and roofing, a refurbished entry stair, and construction of an addition to provide an accessible entry, an elevator and accessible bathrooms, as well as landscaping improvements.

When re-opened to the public, the building will house the archives of the Grand Army of the Republic Commission, including memorabilia from the Civil War, and subsequent war efforts.

## **BUILDING IMPROVEMENT UPDATES**

Below is a list of all the Certificates of Appropriateness approved for projects from November, 2008 through January, 2009:

- 17-19 N. Broadway, Iraklis Panagopoulos, install new awnings
- 59 S. Broadway, Victor Zuno, install new entry door
- 37 S. River Street, Old Second National Bank, install new condenser units
- 60 S. River, Dan Hites, install fire alarm strobes
- 7 S. Stolp, Kinzie Realty Group, scrape, paint and repair windows
- 122 W. Downer Place, The Door Christian Fellowship - install new fascia sign
- 217-219 E. Galena Boulevard – James Figueroa, install new skylights

Other projects of note:

- *Downer Place Bridges* - SEC Group Engineering, Inc. has been working with the City of Aurora Engineering, Downtown Development and Historic Preservation staff as well as the FoxWalk Overlay District Design Review and Historic Preservation Commissions to develop restoration plans.
- *Construction of the Lower Riverwalk, adjacent to new WCC campus* - Christopher B. Burke, Engineering West, Ltd. has been retained to develop permit drawings, based on input from the FoxWalk Overlay District Design Review Committee and the Riverwalk Commission.
- *Ballydoyle Irish Pub* – construction continues; we look forward to their grand opening!
- *Waubonsee Community College* – the official groundbreaking was held on Friday, January 30, 2009; targeted opening is fall, 2011.

## **RETAIL/RESTAURANT ROUNDTABLES PLANNED**

On Monday, March 16, 2009 from 8:00 to 10:00 a.m., downtown retailers, restaurant operators, and owners of food service businesses are invited to a free roundtable discussion hosted by the City of Aurora, Aurora Downtown, and the Waubonsee Community College Small Business Development Center. The session is entitled, “Will Your Business Survive in Tough Times?” and will take place at the David L. Pierce Art and History Center, 20 E. Downer Place.

Workshop speakers include Harriet Parker, Manager, Small Business Development Center at Waubonsee Community College, Kathleen Swigart, Manager, Art & History Center Gift Shop, and Karen Christensen, Downtown Development Director. The agenda will feature short presentations by each of the three, followed by a discussion of the problems facing businesses in downtown Aurora. Participants will be encouraged to use one another as resources to improve their businesses – and will receive information

about ways in which the City of Aurora, Aurora Downtown, and Waubonsee Community College can offer them assistance. Business owners will be assigned “homework” to help them undertake peer reviews of one another’s operations, and evaluate the quality of their own. A follow-up roundtable will be scheduled to discuss findings and support networking among the attendees. Watch your mail for registration materials!

### **HAVE YOU CHECKED THE AURORA DOWNTOWN BUSINESS DIRECTORY?**

There is no doubt in anyone’s mind that economic times are tough – and that means you’ve got to work as hard as you can to be present in the minds of your existing customers and potential new patrons. Aurora Downtown maintains a web-based business directory at [www.auroradowntown.org](http://www.auroradowntown.org). Check your listing for accuracy. If you find errors or wish to make changes to your listing, contact Jennie Grobe at 630-844-3648 or [jgrobe@aurora-il.org](mailto:jgrobe@aurora-il.org). You can support your fellow downtown businesspeople by using the business directory as a resource to locate what you need. Spread the word!

### **QUIT YER BELLYACHIN’ – SIGN UP FOR A COMMITTEE!**

We get many phone calls about various problems in downtown Aurora. We know you don’t want to be just another whiner; you want to be part of the solution. Help make things better by using the enclosed form to sign up for a committee; then you’ll be able to put all your great ideas into action! Remember, too, that Aurora Downtown Board of Directors meetings are open to all: the third Thursday of each month at 8:00 a.m., Conference Room 5B at City Hall, 44 E. Downer Place.

### **ARE YOU SATISFIED?**

Our annual membership survey is also enclosed. The Aurora Downtown Board of Directors seeks your input, which will be used for budget and program planning. You can also report your level of satisfaction with the City’s Downtown Development Division by visiting [www.aurora-il.org/communitydevelopment/customer\\_survey.php](http://www.aurora-il.org/communitydevelopment/customer_survey.php) or by calling Linda Chomiak at 630-844-3670 and requesting a paper copy. Both surveys allow you to remain anonymous. We really want to know what you think!

And, if you have not yet been called upon by the Downtown Services crews, please be sure to complete their Customer Service survey, when they stop by. These folks are really serious about tracking your concerns and issues – and making improvements to address any problems.

### **AURORA ARTWALK: THE NEXT BIG THING**

Mark your calendar for Friday, March 27, 2009 so you don’t miss the next ArtWalk! Visit [www.auroraartwalk.com](http://www.auroraartwalk.com) for photos of the September 12, 2008 event. If you’re interested in serving as a volunteer or artist, or offering space in which performances or displays can be featured, please contact Karen Christensen at 630-844-3670 or Jennifer

Grobe at 630-844-3648. We're planning a third ArtWalk for Friday, June 12, 2009 – so let us know if you want to be part of that one as well.

### **LIVING DOWNTOWN TOUR – MAKE IT A WEEKEND**

Since you'll already be downtown on Friday, June 12<sup>th</sup> for the ArtWalk, make a weekend of it – come back on Sunday, June 14<sup>th</sup> for the Marketing Committee's "Living Downtown Tour."

Many people patronize businesses located on the first floor of downtown buildings and by doing so, get to see first-hand the results of rehabs and revitalization of commercial spaces. The hidden treasures of the neighborhood, however, are the nearly 500 residential units located downtown.

The "Living Downtown" tour is scheduled for Sunday, June 14<sup>th</sup> from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. Visitors can start at the "hospitality center" which will be located at 74-78 S. LaSalle Street. These buildings will also be open to showcase model units and greet visitors:

- Coulter Court Apartments, 104 E. Downer Place
- Downer Place Lofts, 220 E. Downer Place
- The Holbrook Mill, 121 W. Benton Street
- River Street Plaza, 100 S. River Street
- North Island Apartments, 2 N. Stolp
- Fox Island Apartments, 7 S. Stolp
- The Graham Building, 33 S. Stolp

Trolleys will be available for those who prefer to ride from one building to another.

If you own property with upper-floor residential space and would be interested in participating in the "Living Downtown" tour, please contact Jennifer Grobe at 630-844-3648.

### **SPOTLIGHT ON A NEIGHBOR**

Spotlight on: *Cathy and Jeff Jones, River's Edge Cafe*

Contact info: *18 W. Downer Place, 630-897-3343*  
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Hungry for homemade muffins, fresh-brewed coffee, or a veggie eggplant sandwich? Is the winter weather making you crave the warmth of a comfy chair and a soothing fire? Cure your case of cabin fever with a visit to Cathy and Jeff Jones, proprietors of the River's Edge Café.

I had a chance to visit with Jeff on a recent cold afternoon, where we talked about his new business venture in downtown Aurora. Jeff's professional background includes

over 30 years in sales and marketing, starting in an entry level position, and ultimately rising to become president of a corporate division. His career includes stints with Procter & Gamble, Molson Beer, Unilever, and S. C. Johnson. His wife Cathy comes from a family of restaurant operators; she worked in her family's business for over 20 years.

It's apparent that Jeff and Cathy bring skill sets and qualities to the River's Edge Café that have led to the spot's quick success. If you're a regular customer, within seconds of your entry through the front door, Cathy and her well-trained staff have your coffee or beverage ready, without even asking what you wish to order. Employees follow Cathy's lead by greeting customers by name – though Jeff is struggling a bit with putting so many names to faces. "I'm learning my job responsibilities while trying to connect with 40 or 50 people each day," he admitted.

Jeff and Cathy met while working as volunteers in a Humboldt Park (Chicago) soup kitchen. They are committed to a business model that is financially viable, but also "gives back" to the community. Their decision to open the River's Edge Café in downtown Aurora came about after a plan to retire and relocate to Brazil failed to pan out. "We had sold everything," says Jeff. "We were down to 12 boxes...no car, no home, and no turning back." When they were unable to obtain permanent visas for Brazil, they were forced to re-think their plan – and now, looking back, they believe that the business venture with which they are currently involved was exactly what they were meant to be doing.

The Jones's vision for River's Edge Café is one described by sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his 1989 study, The Great Good Place. Oldenburg discusses the reawakening and revival of "third places": "public spots where people can gather, put aside the concerns of home and work (their first and second places), and hang out simply for the pleasures of good company and lively conversation." According to Oldenburg (and Jeff agrees), "great, good places are the heart of a community's social vitality and the grassroots of a democracy."

To that end, Jeff and Cathy are interested in providing a cozy setting in which customers can enjoy homemade, high quality food and friendly service. They are particularly interested in reaching out to students – both from Aurora University and Waubensee Community College. Thursday is "Student Day;" anyone aged 18-23 presenting a valid idea is eligible for a 20% discount. Macaroni and cheese is the featured special, in an effort to appeal to students on a tight budget. The café owners are working with Zechariah McGhee and Iggy Mwela to put together a live entertainment schedule for Thursday and Friday nights. Free Wi-Fi is available for customers – and there's a take-out menu, too, for folks who are too busy to cook.

Currently, Jeff and Cathy employ six people, in addition to themselves. Potential candidates are expected to submit a complete application and resume, and participate in an interview process. Employees are monitored through regular performance reviews. Jeff commented, "We have to work hard at being the best. There is no

substitute for making customers happy. You only get one chance at a restaurant customer; there are so many choices out there – dissatisfied customers have no reason to come back.” Because the café is open six days each week, 6:30 a.m. (10:00 a.m. on Saturdays) until 7:00 p.m. (10:00 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays) - and Jeff and Cathy are on site nearly all the time, they are intent on nurturing top-performing workers, if only to maintain their personal sanity. “We can’t afford to let our quality slip...so we’re making a big commitment to training our staff.”

The owners of River’s Edge Café would be happy to see more coffee shops open in downtown Aurora. “More shops will bring more people downtown,” said Jeff. “We are committed to maintaining high quality food and good service. We think competition is healthy – and believe we are worthy competitors. We will keep getting smarter about what we’re doing, and hope to find more ways to dovetail with activities in downtown Aurora, like performances at the Paramount Theatre and the summertime Downtown Alive Series. We want to help change the perception that there’s nothing to do in downtown Aurora.”

I asked Jeff for war stories. The worst experience to date was something that happened before he and Cathy opened the shop. “We were relaxing in McCarty Park after a bike ride. Another bicyclist sat down and starting talking to us. He told us that his wife would be really angry if she knew that he was hanging out in downtown Aurora because she thinks it’s a dangerous area.” Jeff told me that he and Cathy were really taken aback by this encounter. Having lived and worked in Chicago, they were drawn to Aurora because they had found it to be a safe, interesting community with all the benefits of a big city but without the big city traffic and madness. Plus, they could be out in the country in less than ten minutes if they wanted a break from the urban environment.

His best experience? “A young couple came in on a Saturday night. They told Cathy and me that they lived on the far east side of Aurora. As parents of two little kids, they hadn’t been out on a date in eight months. They read about River’s Edge in the Beacon-News, hired a babysitter, and came down to eat, relax, and sit in front of the fire for three hours. When they left, they said this was the best time they’d had together in years.”

So, drop what you’re doing, grab a friend, and go visit this new downtown business. You won’t be disappointed.

*In the words of George Harrison, “Here Comes the Sun!”*

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