

# Change in downtown Oklahoma City continues fast, furious

Twenty years ago people craved change for downtown Oklahoma City. That change has been hitting ever since, but it's not always as fun as imagined.

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It wasn't that long ago that people craved for change downtown. They saw a dark and forlorn Skirvin Hotel and prayed for change. They saw large empty blocks that were cleared by Urban Renewal in the 1970s and never developed. They drove over a dry river bed south of downtown for decades and cringed at the sight every time.

As the decade of the 1990s got under way, change, it seemed, would never hit downtown.

We finally started to get what we wished for when the original Metropolitan Area Projects initiative was passed in 1993. We also got the sort of change that would give us nightmares for years to come when the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building was bombed in 1995.

And for almost 20 years we've been on a roller coaster of change that never seems to stop. Folks loved the addition of a ballpark in Bricktown, but weren't too thrilled at first when their beloved team that made the ballpark their home was transformed from the 89ers to the RedHawks.

The NBA arrived. Kerr-McGee left. But its tower didn't stay dark for long, thanks to it being swept up by a new company — SandRidge Energy Inc.

Dreams were realized when the Skirvin was fixed up and reopened (with plenty of time to celebrate this year's centennial for the hotel). Those large empty lots are gone. And the change keeps coming — thanks to the construction of a new Devon Energy Corp. headquarters, Project 180, the beautification project, and soon, MAPS 3.

But the changes remain a mixed bag. For example, some cheered and others were heartbroken when SandRidge Energy razed older buildings on the old Kerr-McGee campus to create its own “SandRidge Commons.”

Downtown is going through a restructuring not seen since the 1960s and 1970s, and in the process, some beloved small community treasures may be left behind.

Johnny's Lunch Box, it seemed, might survive. It's part cafeteria, part old-fashioned grill, and all history. As visitors enter, they see a long table with a photo of regulars and

a “reserved” sign that indicates this establishment has been around a while.

For the past few years it's been obvious that as developer Nick Preftakes bought up much of the block bordered by Hudson, Walker, Sheridan and Main Street (including the Lunch Box), that change was inevitable.

We don't know what that change will be, only that it will require that the Lunch Box move or close.

Before Urban Renewal, downtown was home to more than a dozen restaurants that had the decades of history boasted by the Lunch Box. But in this day and age, I'm hard pressed to name any other than the Peacock at Reno and Walker that's been around for a half century or more (and the Peacock is in a building that was built in the late 1990s to replace another that was destroyed in a fire).

Visit both restaurants, soak in the history, and get a good look around. Because the change we once craved is still coming fast, and there's no end in sight.



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