

## Downtown OKC retail space filling up

by Brian Brus

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Tyson Bryan makes a pizza at Hideaway Pizza on Automobile Alley Wednesday. (Maik Sabolich)

OKLAHOMA CITY – The Oklahoma City downtown retail and services market saw fewer businesses opening last year than in previous years, according to the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber.

Each year from 2007 through 2010, about 42,000 square feet of space was developed as restaurants, flower shops, hair salons and other retail businesses in downtown subdistricts such as Bricktown, Automobile Alley and the central business district, according to chamber data. But last year, 11 new businesses opened only 28,343 square feet.

That's actually a good thing because it shows maturation of the market, said Alison Oshel, director of the chamber's

community redevelopment division.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Oshel said. "We're running out of space. Now we're to a point where I think we're going to have to redevelop existing vacancies or build some new stuff. Retail likes ground floor and transparent glazing (windows), and we have pretty much run out of that option. They've already taken all the low-hanging fruit."

The information provided by the chamber allows for business closings as well as openings. For example, when the Interurban restaurant in the business district left last year, it opened about 4,500 square feet that was quickly picked up by the coolgreens restaurant, for a net space gain of zero. Yesterday's Treasures left behind 1,500 square feet in the Midtown District, but moved into 4,400 square feet in Automobile Alley. And even though Falcone's Pizzeria & Deli in Lower Bricktown also closed, that space has already been spoken for by Fuzzy's Taco Shop, which is scheduled to open this year.

Oshel said two other businesses have already announced plans to open this year: Native Roots in Deep Deuce and Sammy's Pizza in central Bricktown.

Since the beginning of 2007, businesses in the area have opened nearly 200,000 square feet, which includes expansions of existing shops.

"I think that there are a few good places left where you've still got some ground-floor space if you made some facades improvements and changed glazing (windows)," she said. "Automobile Alley has some great opportunities because the original intent of those buildings was to show off cars behind glass. ... All the other good ground-floor space in the CBD (central business district) is occupied by banks."

Oshel said more new construction will follow as the heart of the city continues to attract new business. Real estate consultant Darren Currin agreed with her.

"It seems that a lot of retail absorption is taking place in the specialty districts downtown, like Film Row, Automobile Alley and Bricktown," Currin said. "It's really interesting to see retail activity take off that way, and I think that in time you'll see it funnel more into the central core."

"It's also telling how quickly the Interurban space was absorbed by coolgreens," he said. "It shows that the market is strengthening, that space isn't remaining vacant for very long."

Currin said the preponderance of restaurants and fairly low number of retail product outlets will likely continue for several years until the downtown culture turns a corner with a larger number of residents in the immediate vicinity. Alternately, a major developer will have to take the plunge and invest heavily in a central mall to serve as a magnet for shoppers.

But that's jumping ahead too quickly, he said.

"You have to take a step back and appreciate where we've come from in a fairly short amount of time," Currin said. "It's actually remarkable how the area has developed."

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