

## Timing success in Tulsa: Developers assess downtown's growth, potential

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Published: November 8th, 2011



A panel of local business leaders, developers and economic development professionals discussed opportunities and challenges of investing in downtown at Tulsa Community College on Tuesday. Panelists included, from left, Lance Franczyk, managing partner of Northwestern Mutual Financial Group; Tori Snyder, partner and president of Brickhugger LLC; Elliot Nelson, principal owner and founder of McNellie's Group; Clay Bird, Tulsa interim economic development director; and Rose Washington Rentie, executive director of the Tulsa Economic Development Corp. (Photo by Rip Stell)

TULSA – Momentum is growing for downtown, according to a diverse panel of Tulsa business leaders, developers and economic development officials.

"It is a good time to invest in a downtown Tulsa business," said Delise Tomlinson, executive director of downtown development for the Tulsa Metro Chamber. "Momentum is growing and businesspeople need to get on the boat now before they miss out."

The Metro Chamber sponsored the panel, "Investing in Downtown Tulsa," Tuesday at Tulsa Community College downtown. The five panelists discussed opportunities, challenges and regional economic benefits of investing in downtown Tulsa. Panelists included Lance Franczyk, managing partner of Northwestern Mutual Financial Group; Tori Snyder, partner and president of Brickhugger LLC; Elliot Nelson, principal owner and founder of McNellie's Group; Clay Bird, Tulsa interim economic development director; and Rose Washington Rentie, executive director of the Tulsa Economic Development Corp.

The chamber has been contacted about prime sites in downtown, Tomlinson said, but would not disclose any details.

Snyder is head of Brickhugger LCC, which spent \$40 million on the Mayo Hotel restoration and is working to complete a \$25 million renovation of the Tulsa City Hall.

Snyder said anyone wanting to launch a project in Tulsa needs to have a good idea to attract investment and be able to generate plenty of cash flow.

"The bottom line is that people have to see something working," Snyder said. "Ten years ago there was little going on downtown and originally we did not even attempt to ask outside (downtown) investors because we thought no one would."

Nelson formed the McNellie's Group in 2009 and owns and operates 10 restaurants and bars in Tulsa, Oklahoma City and Norman. When Nelson started in 2004, opening James E. McNellie's Public House on First Street in downtown Tulsa, he said he attracted 50,000 to 60,000 customers annually.

Today, the entire Blue Dome District attracts 800,000 people annually, he said.

Nelson said anyone wanting to launch a business downtown needs to be educated about codes and permit requirements from the city.

"Bringing back to life an old building is expensive," Nelson said. "It is hard to take an old building and bring it up to code. And it is not the city's fault; these are codes that are used internationally."

Snyder credited Tulsa Mayor Dewey Bartlett, who sat through the entire two-hour panel discussion, with improving the city's permit process.

To attract more people downtown, Nelson suggested improving security, signage and street parking.

"To take Tulsa to the next level we have to overcome some challenges," Nelson said. "Tulsa needs more housing. And there is a perception that downtown is dangerous – it is not, but there is a feeling it is."

To change that perception Nelson called for a larger police presence – either on foot, bicycle or horseback – to interact with the people.

Nelson said about 25 percent of Tulsa's population visits downtown on a regular basis.

"Then there is a 50-percent majority we are fighting for – and we have to overcome their wrong perceptions with better security, signage. There are signs telling you how to find City Hall and the courthouse, but not the Blue Dome district – and there is the 25 percent that will never come downtown."

Nelson also said the city has to improve street parking.

"There are 1,400 meters, but only about 400 work," Nelson said. "That is 1,000 people taking up parking on the street all day."

Snyder said that mentality needs to change.

"For years, people were used to not paying to park," Snyder said. "People have to accept that you have to pay to park."

Bartlett said the entrepreneurial spirit that launched Tulsa 100 years ago is still alive today downtown.

"Those people understood the risk," Bartlett said. "And the people that came from the Northeast to Tulsa created the visionary city we have today."

Bartlett also cited the Williams Cos. building the tower in the late 1970s as part of that visionary spirit.

"Williams stood up, showed leadership to build and took a lot of risks," he said.

Tomlinson said that growth downtown has not reached critical mass yet.

"But we are well on our way to it," Tomlinson said. "It is kind like the movie star that takes 20 years to become an overnight success: Today we are finding more interest outside the downtown region willing to invest in downtown."