

SEVERAL BUILDINGS will be removed to realize the City Creek Center, including Crossroads Plaza and the ZCMI Center. In all, the 900,000 square feet of retail will replace 1.2 million in those two centers. The three anchor stores will occupy about 425,000 square feet, and the grocery store an additional 50,000.



“THE SKYBRIDGE CHEAPENS OUR HISTORIC DOWNTOWN. CITIES SHOULD BE GATHERING PLACES.” MAYOR ROCKY ANDERSON

Temple Square, the headquarters of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), sets downtown Salt Lake City apart from any other in the United States. The headquarters of a major religion, its peaceful grounds and soaring architecture, including the famed Tabernacle, mesmerize visitors and form the heart of the city. ¶ The rest of Salt Lake’s downtown is clean and pleasant—with a strong employment base and an assortment of older buildings, restaurants, and lightrail service—but it is hardly vibrant or bustling. Foot traffic outside the major tourist attractions of Temple Square is minimal. All of that could change, however. Much of downtown Salt Lake has been developed by the official real estate arm of LDS known as Property Reserve, Inc. (PRI). The company aims to redefine downtown with a massive mixed-use development that would transform two blocks of aging retail malls bordering Temple Square to the south. ¶ Earlier this year, PRI began demolition of those malls on either side of Main Street to make way for a \$1.5 billion, twenty-acre development called City Creek Center. Several key figures in the city have come out against the project, most notably Mayor Rocky Anderson, who worries that it will not revitalize the downtown in a sustainable way. Controversy is brewing in Salt Lake: Will City Creek Center save the city, or is it a false hope?

History Repeating?

This isn't the first time that Salt Lake City has looked to transform its downtown. The malls themselves were the fruit of previous efforts to revitalize the city's core through large-scale redevelopment. In 1975, suburban retail competition spurred PRI to build the ZCMI Center, an enclosed mall anchored by the Zion's Cooperative Mercantile Institution, a department store with roots dating to the time of Brigham Young. In 1980, Crossroads Plaza opened, another interior mall not owned by the LDS church. Both malls performed well for a time, but their focus on the energy and traffic of interior corridors hurt the pedestrian life of Main Street and downtown. By the 1990s, both malls, with 1.2 million total square feet, were in decline. In 1999, the May Department Stores Company purchased the ZCMI store (but not the mall) and later rebranded it as Macy's. Nordstrom, a major anchor store in Crossroads Plaza, was threatening to move to the Gateway, an open-air mall located one-half mile west.

In 2002, PRI considered renovating the ailing ZCMI Center. They purchased Crossroads Plaza in 2003, and the original plan grew to involve the redevelopment of both malls. In October 2006, they unveiled the official plan for City Creek Center.

The development team—including PRI, national retail developer Taubman Centers, and local residential developer Cowboy Partners—plans 900,000 square feet of retail space, anchored by Macy's, Dillard's, and Nordstrom. Six acres will be open space, including a buried creek that they will restore. The remainder of the acreage will house five office towers (four of which already exist), up to 800 units of rental and condominium housing, a grocery store, and 5,600 underground parking stalls.

Since city blocks in Salt Lake City are longer than in most cities, using this development to enliven downtown street life will prove a challenge. Blocks are over 650 feet long, meaning each block is nearly ten acres. By comparison, blocks in eminently walkable downtown Portland measure just 200 feet, so each block is just one acre.

The developers have proposed breaking up each block with a mid-block street running north-south and east-west, making eight blocks from two. Retail development will focus on these "legacy streets," as they're being called,

which will be sited and named after streets that used to exist in downtown Salt Lake City: Richards Street, Regent Street, and Social Hall Avenue.

The general layout of the retail space will resemble many other large, two-story interior malls. Anchor stores will sit at the ends or corners of the development, connected by corridors of shops. City Creek Center's special character is in situating corridors along the legacy streets, some of which will be covered and some open to the elements. A skybridge will connect the second story of retail shops across Main Street, to help circulation of retail shoppers.

The proposal met with broad support from the City Council and the business community, no doubt helped by the fact that the development team will invest the \$1.5 billion without public subsidy. "The Chamber is very excited about it," says Natalie Gochnour, vice president of policy and communications for the Salt Lake Chamber. The Salt Lake Chamber and Downtown Alliance have formally endorsed the project, as have both local newspapers. According to local polls, the general public is also in favor of it.

Controversy Brews

But not everyone is in agreement. Mayor Rocky Anderson immediately felt

that the project would be too much of a reconfigured shopping mall and too little of an organic downtown with a healthy street life. He says he would have preferred development that evolved over time, with a much broader range of developers and architects. "The best thing for the downtown would be to build an authentic streetscape and not a one-developer, one-project solution," Anderson says. He takes particular aim at the skybridge: "The skybridge cheapens our historic downtown. Cities should be gathering places."

According to coverage in the *Deseret News*, one of two local papers, Taubman officials have declared the second-story skybridge vital to the project's success. Many retail experts will agree in principle, since Main Street would divide the two retail blocks, marginalizing second-story retail in particular (retail relies on traffic, and unless the second story of a retail center is connected with easy access, shoppers tend to forgo it). One of Anderson's fears is that visitors could drive to the City Creek Center and shop, eat, and browse, but never venture out and set foot on a public street.

The issue came to a head this spring when the mayor vocally opposed parts of the plan. In response, the City Council approved an amendment to the downtown master plan in April to allow the proposed skybridge. Mayor Anderson vetoed the amendment in May, and the council overrode him.

Although the mayor's opposition has generated the most press, he's not the only one to voice concern. According to Stephen Goldsmith, planning director for Salt Lake City from 2000 to 2003, the real issue is not just the skybridge, but also the privatization of the public realm.

While the proposed short blocks may improve the pedestrian-friendliness of the project, the legacy streets themselves are slated to be privately owned by the LDS, which raises some concern about the nature of the project's street-level "public" space. The skybridge would also be private property. Since the City Creek Center is church-owned, all stores will close on Sundays. Not only will the public not have the right to formally meet, lecture, or protest on the private streets, but without shoppers once a week, the legacy streets will be relatively empty.

Not only will a single entity control City Creek Center, but according to Goldsmith, its design and retail tenants will remain formulaic—mostly national chains. From that point of view, the center will become indistinguishable from other retail malls and lifestyle centers across the country instead of contributing to the authenticity of downtown Salt Lake City. "We need to create cities of lasting value," Goldsmith says. He ponders how the next American city will turn out if we continue to allow a select few large developers deploy all-in-one solutions rather than letting cities evolve organically. The last thing he wants is what he calls the "homogenization of civil society," or for ownership of real estate to become consolidated in the way the news media have.

Gochnour admits that the center is in some ways formulaic. "Some of that may be true," she says, but she stresses that the overall investment in downtown outweighs those concerns. "We have a lot of confidence that the development team knows what they are doing."

PRI and Taubman refused to comment for this article.

The debate has hit a fevered pitch, with Mayor Anderson trying to sell the air rights above Main Street to a third party that would create a conservation easement and prevent construction of the skybridge. He has also offered to close parts of Main Street to improve street-level pedestrian circulation. But an opposed supermajority on the City Council will likely prevent both moves, and Mayor Anderson's term is up. He leaves office in early 2008, and many of the mayoral candidates are in favor of the project. □

THE PROPOSAL MET WITH BROAD SUPPORT FROM THE CITY COUNCIL AND THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY