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After years of planning and building, attractions helping revive downtown Dallas



The splash park at Klyde Warren Park is an especially popular spot for kids as the weather becomes warmer.

By DAVID FLICK

Staff Writer

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Porshia and Adrian Mills drove from their home in Euless on a recent weekday to downtown Dallas, a place they don't often visit.

"We came here specifically for the park. We heard so much about it," Porshia said. "We thought it might be nice to try something different."

Klyde Warren Park was dedicated just over six months ago, joining an unprecedented wave of amenities opening in or near downtown. In the past few years, two other downtown parks, a convention hotel, the AT&T

Performing Arts Center, the Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge and the Perot Museum of Nature and Science have debuted.

During the decades of planning that led to hundreds of millions of dollars in investment, supporters and skeptics asked the same question: Would the finished product help revitalize downtown?

The early evidence is that it has.

Since the opening of Klyde Warren Park, ridership on the nearby McKinney Avenue Trolley has jumped 61 percent from the same period last year.

The Perot Museum, where officials hoped for a million visitors the first year, had 500,000 in its first 100 days.

The Dallas Museum of Art eliminated admission charges in January. In February and March, the number of visitors rose 46 percent over last year.

Less precise but still credible is the testimony of area restaurant owners, who say business is up substantially. And private investment is apparently increasing.

Phil Puckett, vice president at the Dallas office of CBRE, a commercial real estate services firm, said rents near the park have jumped several dollars per square foot in the past few months. Some of the change may be related to the recovering economy, he said, but not all.

"Since the park opened in October, there has been a transformation in both Uptown and downtown," he said. "In my 20-year career, I've never seen anything create such a spark as that little park."

Tough to count

Staff at the Woodall Rodgers Park Foundation, which runs Klyde Warren Park, has tried to document attendance there with hand clickers. The official count averages 15,000 visitors per week, but foundation leaders believe that number is far from accurate.

"We don't have turnstiles. People can enter and leave at almost any point and we wouldn't count them," said Jody Grant, foundation chairman. "I was out there [on a recent] Friday and there were 10,000 people then."

No one reason, including the park, accounts for the increased foot traffic, downtown supporters say. Completion of the Arts District four years ago has added to the draw. Convention business, sluggish for several years, showed a significant jump after the Omni Dallas Hotel opened in late 2011.

Phillip Jones, president and CEO of the Dallas Convention and Visitors Bureau, said the number of large conventions has tripled in Dallas since then.

The hotel has helped lure business, he said, but it isn't solely responsible for the increase.

“A hotel by itself can’t bring about vibrancy,” Jones said. “Nobody wants to bring people to a city that’s dead.”

The leaders of some downtown attractions say their attendance numbers have increased, but for reasons other than the amenities boom.

Attendance at the Dallas World Aquarium has leveled off this year, but only because the facility is nearing capacity after increasing almost 20 percent each of the past few years, said spokeswoman Arden Richardson.

The number of visitors at The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza is expected to increase slightly above last year’s figure of 340,000. But officials attribute the difference to interest in the 50th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Still, the park’s supporters insist it has had a significant effect.

Visitors are now more likely to linger in the area after visiting a nearby museum, attending a performance or eating at a restaurant, said John Crawford, president and CEO of the nonprofit Downtown Dallas.

“When people come, they have more places to go, and the park is in the middle of that,” he said. “Individually, there’s no one thing to focus on; it’s a number of things. But the biggest thing to move the needle was Klyde Warren Park.”

Growing pains

The changes have brought growing pains.

Debbie Lacher, who lives along Turtle Creek Boulevard, visits the park frequently. It’s one of her favorite local destinations, she said, but she hears complaints.

“It gets crazy crowded on weekends,” she said. “You get long lines at the bathrooms and drinking fountains.”

Crowds at the nearby Perot Museum have been so overwhelming that some of its interactive exhibits, designed for constant use, have broken. The museum’s plaza is also being revamped to deal with heavy wear.

At Klyde Warren Park, temporary barriers were set up to let trampled grass recover. Park officials have spent \$70,000 repairing and resealing hard surfaces battered by overuse. Meanwhile, when long lines form at the park’s temporary restrooms, those at the Dallas Museum of Art get busy.

The issue that has most dampened celebration of the area’s success, however, has been a controversial proposal by park leaders to create a public improvement district to help pay for the park’s upkeep.

Leaders of nearby cultural institutions have criticized the idea, arguing that revenue for the district's proposed tax levy would benefit the park to the exclusion of everyone else. The proposal is awaiting a decision by the City Council.

Few of those leaders would discuss the issue publicly, but Grant acknowledged it had generated hard feelings among usual allies.

"The PID issue is a growing pain, and it's unfortunate," he said. "We were surprised at the amount of friction that there was."

Critical mass

For a generation, downtown boosters have said — and hoped — that public investment in the park and the adjacent arts district would create a critical mass — the point at which private money would take over the job started by public investment.

Though the picture looks brighter than it has in decades, even downtown's strongest supporters say the dream of a new boom is still unrealized.

"I think we're near, but I don't think we're there yet," Crawford said. "I think we're still working to achieve what everyone agrees needs to be done."

Maxwell Anderson, director of the Dallas Museum of Art, said sufficient street life in the area is still missing.

"We're seeing the potential of downtown as a center of culture, but it's a beginning stage because we don't have cafes, we don't have retail lining Flora Street," Anderson said.

The area has come a long way, he said.

BY THE NUMBERS: Growing popularity

McKinney Avenue Trolley

November-March ridership

2011-12: 140,658

2012-13: 215,849

Perot Museum attendance in first 100 days

504,277 visitors

More than 94,000 kids participated through field trips or off-site museum programs

3,400 household memberships

Dallas Museum of Art

Spring break visitors

2012: 17,632

2013: 29,565