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Sundance Square Plaza unfolds with fanfare

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FORT WORTH — Sundance Square Plaza opened to the public Friday to great fanfare, as city and civic leaders praised the project as an asset that makes downtown Fort Worth a premier destination.

“What a fabulous place this is,” said Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price. She said the bar has been raised in downtown experiences nationwide as a result.

“We’ve always talked about Sundance Square, but we’ve never had a square. Now we have a square,” Price said. “We’ve started something that can’t be capped. Make this your favorite place to be in the city.”

Hundreds of city and civic leaders, downtown office workers and downtown residents filled the plaza Friday morning for the plaza’s opening ceremony. As choreographed, the water fountains were turned on and the four massive 32-foot umbrellas that cover a portion of the plaza’s east side started unfolding as confetti cannons shot red and gold streamers into the air and the Hunter Sullivan Band played “Sundance Square Signature Sound,” a piece commissioned for the event.

But as proud as Ed Bass, the lead developer of the downtown district, was to show off the 1-acre plaza, he said work in Sundance Square is not yet done. Only half of the land owned by the family’s Sundance Square development group has been completed, he said.

Bass suggested the next project in Sundance Square could be a 150-room boutique hotel and room for about 500 parking spaces at what is now a parking lot at the southwest corner of Fourth and Houston streets. He said plans also still include developing town homes and apartments on several vacant blocks east of the City Center towers.

“This is a spurt,” Bass said of the plaza. “A spurt like this can make it almost look easy. Remember this, my brother Sid and other civic leaders began working on the revitalization of Fort Worth, including Sundance Square, 35 years ago. This is not the completion of the Sundance Square master plan. We’ve got more to do.”

A central plaza has been included on several city master plans over the years. It is built on what were two surface parking lots, widely seen as the square of Sundance Square, between Third and Fourth streets, and Commerce and Houston streets. Main Street between Third and Fourth streets is now closed to vehicle traffic.

Sundance Square announced the \$110 million project two years ago, which also includes new office buildings that bookend the plaza on the east and west sides, The Commerce Building and The Westbrook Building. The project also involves the further restoration of the Jett Building, which features the widely-recognized Chisholm Trail mural, and the Land Title Building on Third Street, and the addition of a 2,000-square-foot event pavilion.

Friday’s ceremony was held in about the same spot Sundance Square held the plaza’s ground-breaking 18 months ago. Crews worked feverishly the last several weeks to meet Friday’s deadline, but it came down to the wire, said Johnny Campbell, Sundance Square’s president and CEO.

Workers were still placing brick pavers at 10 p.m. Thursday and the fountains weren’t tested until after that.

“We promised we had a plan, a team, a calendar and a window that we were going to deliver this in,” Campbell said. “We’re here today to make that delivery. The plaza goes to work today. This is an exciting first day of operation of the plaza.”

Michael Vergason, principal of Michael Vergason Landscape Architects in Alexandria, Va., who helped design the plaza, was on hand for the ceremony. Afterward, he said it was an extraordinary push, but that some tweaking will be done. Other things, such as a pair of gates are still planned for the south side of the plaza, will be added, he said.

Vergason said the plaza doesn’t finish Sundance Square, but called it “a strong punctuation.”

“There will be a lot of details that need to be refined or refinished,” Vergason said. “I’m very pleased with the way it is now. It’s a good reflection of what we envisioned. Great public places evolve over time. They take on character as they age, and become a reflection of the community the way they are used. We’ve created a very good platform for that to happen.”

The plaza was being put to use even before the official opening.

Bonnie Elliott, who lives in The Tower a block away, arrived early with her dog, Oscar, and a breakfast sandwich, sitting on a bench and

listening to the Hunter Sullivan Band play on the new permanent stage on the west side of the plaza. As she waited for the festivities to begin, she said she plans to use the plaza “all the time. We’re always out and about. It’s awesome.”

Bob and Marion Paluck drove in from their Eagle Mountain Lake home.

“We wanted to see it,” Marion Paluck said. The couple, who volunteer with the annual Parade of Lights event, said they’ll likely come downtown more now that the plaza is finished.

Tarrant County Commissioner Roy Brooks called the plaza a great community place.

“This project is about energy. It’s about excitement. It’s about bringing people into the downtown core,” Brooks said. “It’s about encouraging a greater sense of community. This whole thing is just magnificent.”



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