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By Matt Sutkoski

WINOOSKI -- The grand opening for Winooski's new and revamped downtown is Friday.

Never mind that the 135,000-square-foot, four-story Vermont Student Assistance Corp. building is still empty, developers are still negotiating storefront leases, and workers are still putting the finishing touches on the city's radically redesigned streets. The 920-space municipal parking garage is open, but motorists pick their way past noisy construction equipment and orange barricades to get there. No students live in the student housing.

But Winooski residents from Mayor Clem Bissonnette on down say they can't contain themselves any longer. It's time to celebrate Winooski's new downtown, especially because many people once wondered whether so much as a shovelful of dirt would be turned to build the project .

"I thought it was going to be all talk and nothing was going to happen," said Doris Barton, 70.

So did a lot of other people, Bissonnette said, remembering back to the day in 1999 he and others announced the ambitious plans for the city's downtown. Back then, the centerpiece was a large, rutted and almost empty parking lot. Previous efforts to restore downtown Winooski fizzled.

"We expected to be in the ground within a year. It took us 5 years to get there," Bissonnette said. Buildings are up; the roads are redesigned; apartments and condominiums are on the way; and developers are ready to sign leases for a project they call Winooski Falls.

Winooski's downtown is a bit like a bustling household with a new baby. The arrival is enthusiastically welcomed, but it can also be tiring, vaguely annoying and take some time to get used to.

The new buildings will

bring life to Winooski, but they're surprisingly big, some residents said. The large roundabout seems to make downtown traffic flow better, many residents say, but others think the traffic circle is confusing. And everyone wonders how and to what extent Winooski will change once the new residents arrive, more businesses open, and more money flows in and out of stores, households and city coffers.

Barton just shrugs and waits to see what happens, even if the new downtown is a little disorienting. "You've got to expect change," Barton said.

So far

The five years of negotiations and financial wrangling preceding construction almost derailed the project numerous times, Bissonnette said. "Good things don't come easy," he noted.

Bissonnette and Ken Braverman, Winooski Falls project manager, said once construction crews were cleared to move in, they were surprised by how smoothly things went. True, it was challenging coordinating street and building construction, but there were no major problems, Braverman said.

Andrew Burnes, HallKeen president and CEO, said he is gratified by the number of calls from potential residential and retail tenants who've expressed interest in moving to Winooski. HallKeen and the Braverman Co. are the development partners for Winooski Falls.

"I'm amazed at the level of interest from national tenants," Burnes said.

There are still glitches, of course. A complex of 213 apartments and ground floor storefronts just to the east of the new buildings were supposed to be under construction by now, but nothing has happened. Blame Hurricane Katrina for that, Braverman said.

The start of construction was scheduled for early September, but Katrina sent the cost of building supplies soaring and the availability of the materials plunging. Fuel and just about everything else for construction projects also suddenly were more expensive. HallKeen decided to wait out

the hurricane instability.

Construction will start in the next few weeks, and people should start moving into the apartments in spring 2007, Braverman said. Rents will range from \$800 to \$1,400 a month.

More expensive condominiums will rise closer to the Winooski River. Braverman said he isn't worried about variability in the real estate market.

"The market is still very strong," he said.

Effects

Winooski's physical changes are obvious, but residents say they are unsure how it will change the character of the city. Opinions are mixed.

Business people are optimistic about the city's economy. "I don't see any negatives. Winooski has needed this for a long time," said Joanne Barup, who was working Friday at Classy Closet, the Main Street consignment shop her sister Beverly Gervia owns.

She said the new buildings and new residents will increase traffic to stores in most of the city.

Nic Vartuli, assistant manager at Main Street Lighting Outlet, agreed. "It will act as a magnet to draw more consumers into Winooski, which is something Winooski has needed for a long time," Vartuli said.

Don Vickers, president and CEO of Vermont Student Assistance Corp., said he and his 365 employees are looking forward to moving into their new headquarters. All of VSAC's staff will be at work in the new building by the first of the year, he said.

The move means all VSAC employees will work under one roof, and clients will have more room to consult with VSAC personnel. He also predicted that employees will patronize neighboring business, especially now that street construction is winding down.

Jonathan Guy is counting on that. Several businesses closed or curtailed operations in downtown Winooski during the construction because customers had trouble fighting their way among roadblocks, backhoes, cranes and excavations.

Guy thinks that now that the worst of the street work is over, it's time to move in. He plans to open Vanilla Bean, a coffeehouse and ice cream shop in the Winooski Block, occupying a space formerly occupied by the Vermont Sandwich Co.

"For a long time, Winooski was just a lot of traffic passing in and out. Now they've created a town or city center," Guy said. The VSAC workers, the students and the apartment dwellers will create a critical mass for Vanilla Bean, Guy said. "There's a lot of potential customers there."

While some people in Winooski are thinking about money, others are looking at the city's soul, and hope all the new buildings, residents and office workers don't change things too much.

"I've always loved Winooski. Everything is so close. You know everybody. It's a really tight-knit community," said Taylor Thompson, 14, a Winooski High School freshman. She wondered if Winooski's small-town feel will linger as more people move in.

"I think it would hurt because there will be a lot more people here," said Selma Turic, 15, a Winooski High School sophomore.

"It could go either way. Maybe some people are going to leave. Who knows?" Thompson said.

Others doubt the reconstruction will change Winooski's neighborhoods too much, but wish it would. In the scruffy neighborhood around West Lane and Malletts Bay Avenue, resident Julie Orenbach looked doubtfully at a ragged apartment building across the street and said the new downtown might as well be a world away.

"I think it will stay the same. It's been like this for a long time.," Orenbach said. "We could use a lot less trouble."

Bissonnette said the city can't and won't ignore neighborhoods outside the redevelopment zone. He said the city is using its community development office, its rental registry program and other means to improve neighborhoods it.

Bissonnette said the city's Friday celebration is mostly about the inevitability of Winooski's rebirth, finally happening after urban renewal promises made more than 30 years ago.

"There's no place to go but forward," he said.

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Coming out party

WHAT: The city is holding a Welcome Back to Downtown Winooski party.

WHEN: 2 to 5 p.m. Friday.

WHO: Public invited.

WHERE: The Commons, the new park in the center of the recently built roundabout in downtown Winooski.

DETAILS: Dedication of the traffic circle, parking garage is at 2:30 p.m. A municipal library and Historical Society dedication in the Champlain Mill begins at 3. A reception and tours of the project site begin at 3:30.

On the Web

City: www.onioncity.com

Downtown developer's Web page: www.winooskifalls.com

Downtown progress

GARAGE: 920-space parking garage is open.

VERMONT STUDENT ASSISTANCE CORP.: Four-story building on East Allen Street is nearly complete. Employees to move in December.

STREETS: Construction is largely finished. Redesign includes a large roundabout, which is open. The city's Web site (www.onioncity.com) has an animated primer to help people navigate the roundabout. Landscaping and finishing details to be completed in the spring.

SPINNER PLACE: Upper floor student housing, lower floor retail space. Some transfer UVM students to move in during the winter. The bulk of the residents will move in later in 2006. Ground floor storefronts to be leased in January.

BARLOW SQUARE: Roughly 300,000- square-foot complex containing 213 apartments and about 3,900 square feet of ground floor retail space just east of Spinner Place. Most apartment rents range from \$800 to \$1,400 a month. Construction to start within weeks. First tenants are expected to move in around March 2007.

CHAMPLAIN MILL: Winooski Memorial Library and Historical Society are open inside. Once VSAC moves out, upper floors are expected to be converted to loft apartments, with the first residents scheduled to move in in late 2007.

THE CASCADES: Construction of new condominiums near the Winooski River to start in the summer. Residents could move into the more than 200 units as soon as spring 2007.

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