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Things will be great, downtown

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WINOOSKI

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Downtown Winooski looks and feels completely different from a year ago, and more big changes are coming in 2006.

Winooski tried for more than 30 years, since the days of urban renewal, to remake and revive its downtown. Efforts began, then sputtered over the years. In 1999, when city officials announced a bold plan to build thousands of square feet of buildings in the city's downtown, many residents were skeptical.

As the year draws to a close, Vermont Student Assistant Corp. employees work in their new four-story building on East Allen Street. Visitors to Winooski park in a 920-space garage. Developers are leasing housing for University of Vermont students in a four-story downtown building. Ground-floor retail tenants are next. Motorists glide around a large traffic circle in the middle of the city.

During 2006, construction will continue on a 213-unit apartment building with retail space. Condominiums are expected to rise close to the banks of the Winooski River.

The whole transformation is so new that residents aren't sure how the newly bustling city will change culturally, economically and socially. Business owners, some of whom closed down temporarily during the chaos of construction, have reopened. Others delayed opening new businesses until after the bulk of the construction tapered off. The near-unanimous opinion among those shop owners, restaurateurs and office managers is that the development would bring plenty of people to downtown Winooski, increasing traffic into stores.

"There's a lot of potential customers there," Jonathan Guy said last month as he prepared to open an ice cream and coffee shop in the historic Winooski Block.

Other residents wondered what kind of people would move to town and whether the influx would disrupt the small-town feel of Winooski's neighborhoods. The consensus was to wait and see; at least the city no longer seemed to be stagnating.

The redevelopment project is complex, both financially and logistically. Even so, there have been few major complications. Construction companies involved in the redevelopment work reported minor snafus, communications problems and delays, but those did not put the project behind schedule.

Construction is expected to continue through 2006, but since the streets are largely finished and the new buildings will be away from heavily traveled areas, few people expect many traffic disruptions. Developers acknowledge the housing market nationally has softened a bit, but demand remains strong in Vermont, and the phone has been ringing incessantly with calls from people wanting to move in.

Federal Housing and Urban Development officials audited the project's finances and found everything in order. The federal auditors were so impressed, Gov. Jim Douglas said earlier this year, that the Winooski project would be used as a model for similar projects elsewhere in the United States.

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