

# Transforming Meadville

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## How major developments are changing the face of the city's downtown

MEADVILLE -- Former Meadville resident Carol Welter said she couldn't believe what she saw as she visited Meadville for the first time in at least six years.

"There seems to be so much going on," said Welter, who lives in Akron, Ohio. "I went around the Diamond and saw work at that old school and they told me it was going to be an apartment complex with offices, and there's the new homes and offices right by the Market House."

Much has happened in recent years and is happening now. So much so that sometimes the big picture that shows the total change is lost, said Meadville Redevelopment Authority Executive Director Andy Walker.

"It is so easy to treat any of these as individual projects and not see the whole of everything," Walker said. "Seemingly, there is a lot of momentum building with these projects. Good things lead to good things"

Among the major recent development projects are:

- Impact Meadville, the largest of the developments and, at \$14 million, the most expensive public-private redevelopment project in Meadville's history. It is the first project to include middle-income housing in the downtown.

Impact Meadville includes the Kepler Hotel project, which transformed the historic structure into 30 apartment-style condominiums on the second and third floors and commercial space on the first. It opened in May 2004, and 10 townhouses are now completed, with 10 more to be constructed soon.

Robert T. Yoder, of Turbotville, Northumberland County, and head of Susquehanna Valley Development Group, is the private developer behind the project.

- Parkside Commons is the transformation of the former Meadville Junior High School on the northeast corner of the Diamond into a commercial and residential complex. Work is now under way on the first phase of the project. The developer is Tom Kennedy of Erie.
- Market Square Condominiums on Chestnut Street. The project is converting and renovating 215-219 Chestnut St. into two condominiums on the second floor and three updated retail/commercial spaces at street level. Saegertown native Mark Reed, who spent about 15 years in San Diego before moving back to the area, is the developer.
- @ The Bank, the former PNCBank/First National Bank of Pennsylvania building at 940 Park Ave., is a multi-tenant retail center that is serving as something of a private retail and business incubator in the downtown. Retired local physician Ed Fine is the developer.

Other recent development projects include a new chiropractic office building at 991 Park Ave. And more is coming.

Vantage Holding Co. LLC, parent of Vantage Health Systems, recently announced plans to transform an old Talon building and property on South Main Street into a corporate campus and headquarters, where it will consolidate its operations and expand.

Walker said Kennedy's redevelopment of the former junior high complex and Fine's @ The Bank are particularly interesting because both had long been considered Meadville's "white elephants" that seemed to spurn interest.

Fine's project is also unique because of the roll it serves as an incubator, Walker said.

"He's doing a phenomenal job of recruiting new businesses to the downtown, expanding businesses and giving people who have an idea to go into business the opportunity," Walker said. "That's critical to populate businesses in the downtown and a huge benefit to the community."

Charlie Anderson, executive director of the Chamber of Commerce, said it is interesting that much of the development is the result of people who come from outside the Meadville area, or in the case of Reed, have been away for years.

"They come and see the potential," he said. "I've always considered myself being a pretty good vision guy, but these guys are way ahead of me."

Driving the interest of outsiders in Meadville is the low cost of property and doing business, plus its location along major highway corridors and rail service, he said.

Walker said the developers tell him the same thing.

"We should be marketing on a national basis that this is an affordable place to bring your business," he said.

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