

Grand Rapids Builds into the Future

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The grim economy of Michigan and other industrialized states makes the resurgence of Grand Rapids all the more impressive. The region is seeing manufacturing jobs—the bread and butter of the west Michigan economy—evaporate because of increased productivity, competition overseas, and friendlier business climates in other states, but the area is rapidly adapting.

THE GRAND RAPIDS AREA is fortunate to have several philanthropic families, most notably, the DeVos and Van Andel families. They earned their wealth through founding Amway, now Alticor, and soon to be Amway again. They have given back to the community extensively, and it has been their giving and leadership that has been a major catalyst to the rebirth of Grand Rapids. During the recent gubernatorial campaign, Dick DeVos released a list of their charitable giving, and it was over four pages in length.

A laundry list could be printed of the redevelopment and changes that have taken place. The Van Andel Arena, new pubs and restaurants, DeVos Place, the Medical Hill, the new JW Marriott, the relocation of the Michigan State University medical school, the new Grand Rapids Art Museum, and the

demand for downtown living have all added to the change. Even the passing of President Gerald R. Ford brought a renewed interest in the Ford Museum along the Grand River.

The newest addition to the Grand Rapids economy—and landscape—is the JW Marriott, the only hotel of the JW

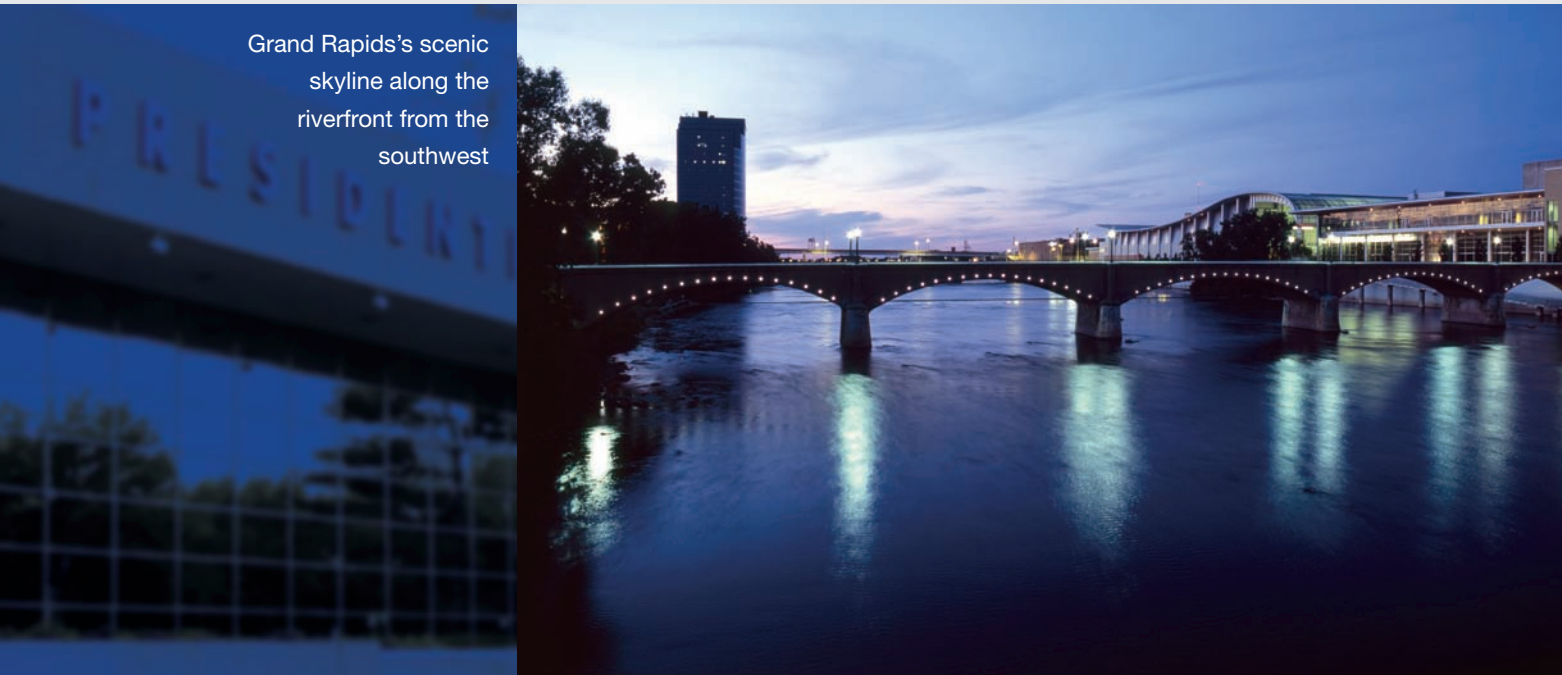
competition, Grand Rapids is adapting. As the region for the last 100 years was known for its quality furniture, community leaders hope that for the next 100 years the area will be known for its excellence in health care.

Tom DeBoer, Vice President of the Office Group of Grubb Ellis Paramount

Use Academies over the last several years will remember him speaking about one project specifically: The Mid Towne Village.

Located at the Southeast corner of I-196 and College Avenue, The Mid Towne Village is being built where 35 homes once stood. The goal of the development is to

Grand Rapids's scenic skyline along the riverfront from the southwest



chain in the Midwest. The \$100 million hotel has 337 rooms on 23 floors. The entire hotel is non-smoking and will offer “atypical” amenities, such as 37-inch plasma televisions. The hotel’s first guest, by accident, was comedian Tim Allen, who showed up to the hotel September 8, unable to find a room elsewhere in Grand Rapids, and not knowing the JW wasn’t officially open. They let him stay anyway.

GRNow.com said of the hotel, “Since 1981, the Amway Grand Plaza has been the flagship hotel in Grand Rapids. However, in 2007, the torch will be passed to the...JW Marriott.” But, consider the torch being passed from one hand to the other: Like the Amway Grand Plaza, the JW Marriott will be owned and operated by the Amway Hotel Corp.

Grand Rapids has a long history of being a manufacturing city and is most notable for office furniture. As that sector of the economy is impacted by global

Commerce, believes the most notable change in Grand Rapids is “its progression into the medical/medical research markets. We have always had strong teaching hospitals like St. Mary’s and Spectrum Hospital; however since the Van Andel Institute was opened in 2000, we have seen a steady increase in the interest in other related companies wanting to come to Grand Rapids including the announcement last year of MSU opening a new medical school there.

“I don’t believe anyone will disagree that this community has been blessed with the philanthropic giving from our past and present business leaders; however, it is the community as a whole that has continued to work together to make Grand Rapids a growth community for medical research and related fields,” DeBoer said.

David Levitt of S.J. Wisinski & Company, has worked extensively on the “Medical Hill” area. Attendees of the MAR Land

create a walkable community of residential, retail, and office spaces. It is also within walking distance of Spectrum Health’s Downtown Medical Campus, Grand Valley State University’s Nursing



Rendering courtesy of Helen DeVos Children’s Hospital.

School, DeVos Children's Hospital, and the Van Andel Institute. A 15,000-square-foot park called The Village Green will be the centerpiece of the community, creating a campus-type setting complete with benches, a reflecting pond and a fountain, according to their Web site.

The medical area of Grand Rapids includes Spectrum Health, the Van Andel Institute, and the newest addition: MSU's medical school. Former Ambassador Peter Secchia pledged \$20 million of the \$40 million the project is expected to cost. The building will be called the Secchia Center and is estimated to open in 2010. With the medical school, Grand Rapids has all the components of a life-sciences hub: treatment, research and teaching. City leaders hope Grand Rapids will soon rank alongside Cleveland and Rochester, Minnesota as far as destination treatment centers.

Lody Zwarensteyn of the Alliance for Health told WZZM13 in January of this year, "It's been found that when you have research and medical education in a community, it helps the quality of health care. So, in our quest to become the medical Mecca of the United States, it would certainly behoove us to have the highest quality that's possible."

Students are expected in 2008, and the full four-year school should be in place by 2010.

"Our lack of a leading university medical school program translates to a lack of intellectual and venture capital that serves as powerful magnets in attracting what we hope is a new life-sciences industry to the state," VAI Chairman David Van Andel said in October 2006, according to *RapidGrowthMedia.com*.

Levitt wrote on his blog, *Bricks & Sticks*, in June 2005, "While we don't need production space and production workers like we have in the past, we are seriously short on medical workers. I know a local entrepreneur who is setting up a nursing import company to bring in nurses from overseas. Think about that, we are sending production jobs overseas and at the same time importing knowledge workers to fill empty jobs here."

Downtown living is also a key component to the revitalization of Grand Rapids. Sam Cummings, owner of Second Story Properties ("Cool new spaces in great old places" is their motto) has overseen several projects that include converting factories and warehouses into apartments and condominiums.

Redeveloping existing buildings has been key in downtown

Grand Rapids. Developers are maintaining the character of neighborhoods and downtown by using existing spaces and recreating them for new uses. Their Web site says Second Story Properties redesigned their logo in 2000 as, "an open book with a cover that looks like the facade of a building — reinforc[ing] the message that the story of these century-old buildings will continue for another hundred years."

One such project is The Fitzgerald. Cummings is converting the old YMCA on Library Street into luxury condos, ranging from \$209,000 to \$650,000, according to a story by Rapid Growth Media. As of August 2006, 40 percent of the units had been sold.

"Cummings said mixing people with a variety of income levels is important for the overall health of the economy and culture in the central city. That benefits all downtown residents, especially in Grand Rapids where low-income and subsidized housing has dominated the housing market for decades," the Web site says.



An artist's rendering of the proposed design for the Helen DeVos Children's Hospital.

Fair Housing Center of West Michigan, donated by Chase.



Second Story's Web site sums their mission up by saying, "Second Story continues to acquire and develop partnerships with others interested in historic structures within the downtown Grand Rapids area. The company focuses on doing things right, often undertaking intensive renovation projects to preserve and restore historic details of the original building."

Cummings has also been active in the new Grand Rapids Art Museum, which opened in October. The museum has earned the distinction of being the first Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)-certified museum in the world. The LEED Green Building Rating System™ is the nationally accepted benchmark for the design, construction and operation of high-performance green buildings, according to the museum's Web site.

Tom DeBoer believes what is allowing the Grand Rapids area to better weather the economic storm Michigan is going through is that, "We were not tied to a single business sector like automotive. When one part of our economy falters, like automotive, we typically did not see our economy make a rapid fall." He also noted that statistics from 10 years ago showed that 80 percent of the jobs were in companies with fewer than 50 employees. The decrease of large corporations could lead one to believe that percentage would be even higher today.

When asked what they believe Grand Rapids will look like 10 years from now, DeBoer said, "As we move to the future, there may be a shift from our traditional manufacturing of furniture and automotive to new areas such as medical devices, pharmaceutical and bio-science areas."

Grand Rapids is going through the challenging economic transition to be relevant and a place to gravitate towards in the 21st century. With philanthropic and civic leadership, they are making great strides toward their goal of being a leader in the field of medicine in this century, just as they were a leader in manufacturing in the 20th century. 🏠



Image courtesy Rafael Wifoly Architects.

An artist's rendering of the proposed design for the Van Andel Institute.

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