

*Celebrating the Past, the Present  
and the Future...*

## *The Grand Forks Town Square*

A larger-than-life paddlewheel beckons visitors into a spacious open-air square in downtown Grand Forks, North Dakota. Fountains of water on both sides of the stainless-steel wheel give the illusion that the large paddles are turning and churning, much like the riverboats of yesteryear.

Inside the square, brightly colored playground equipment entices children to... just be kids. Nearby, concrete tabletops inlaid with checkerboards await the next game between friends.

The features all are part of the city's new Town Square, a community gathering place that overlooks the Red River of the North, considered to be both friend and foe to this city of 50,000.

In the late 1800s, the trade brought by paddlewheel steamboats gave Grand Forks life. In the late 1900s—1997 to be exact—that same river overwhelmed much of the town, leaving destruction in its wake.



*John O'Leary sees a great future for the Town Square, designed as a year-round community gathering place for the city that has learned to respect the river.*



*A stainless-steel paddlewheel, reminiscent of the steamboats that came to the city more than a century ago, frames the entrance to the Town Square.*

Afterwards, when Grand Forks citizens were given the chance to envision a new downtown, they wanted to create positive spaces.

So urban planners, on loan to the city to help with the recovery, suggested a town square where the community could come year-round to enjoy a variety of activities. In October 2000, that vision became reality.

The square fills downtown's prime corner, the gateway to Grand Forks for those crossing the river from Minnesota. Along one side, there are several square booths topped with alternating red and yellow canvas canopies. The spaces can be used for Farmer's Markets or other vendor-style activities.

In another corner, a covered stage equipped with electrical service and a sound system, can



*ArtWise, a local non-profit organization, extended special invitations to elementary students to create a design that would reflect activities in the community throughout all four seasons. ArtWise promotes children's art along with art education in Grand Forks.*



*A little grout here, a little grout there helps finish off the installation of these tiles, designed by Grand Forks elementary students and inlaid into a wall bordering the playground area.*



*Out of 1,100 entries, 82 were chosen by a panel of judges to be reproduced for the special wall. The original drawings then were commercially etched into the tiles.*

host open-air concerts or plays. The center of the square, inlaid with bricks, is large and open to allow a number of activities. In the wintertime, city workers can turn the center area into an ice rink by adding temporary walls, a ground mat and water. When the rink is taken down, the water can be channeled into several nearby ground drains.

In short, it is a place that offers something for everyone all four seasons of the year, says John O'Leary, the city's former urban development director. O'Leary was heavily involved in the planning of the Town Square, funded with about \$1.1 million in Community Development Block Grants. The playground equipment was donated by Lafarge Dakota of Valley City, North Dakota.

"When the town square was first being discussed, downtown was a pretty grim environment," O'Leary said. "There were piles of brick and twisted steel and a lot of empty storefronts. One by one, these storefronts are filling up with antique stores and gift shops and candy stores and bookstores... a kind of friendly place."

The square replaces a flood-damaged clothing store, drug store and café—all razed after the disaster. Mindful that the square is in a 100-year floodplain, project designers incorporated many features that will minimize future flood damage.

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The vendor booths, tables and benches all are concrete. The stage is concrete and 3 feet high. The electrical service and sound systems are elevated another 4 feet above that. Several openings allow water to flow through end to end.

“When we designed this town square, we wanted to tie it back into our original heritage of what the river meant to us and how we treat the river today,” O’Leary said. “We really can’t blame what happened to us in ’97 on the river. We made some unwise choices about where we were going to build and how we were going to build.

“Now, we’re trying to re-establish downtown to create a sense of space,” O’Leary explained. “Downtown is a reflection of our hearts... the architecture, the history. It’s the core of our community.

“The legacy of our central business district after the flood shouldn’t be the buildings that burned,” he added. “Instead, it should be that this is a unique place. It should be that this is a place of social and historical significance. It should be a place that we can be proud of... that we not only recovered from the flood but that we brought the downtown to a point where it can survive and prosper.”



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