

Real Estate

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Kent Station has been big win for Kent

- *The complex is a hub of retail, education and entertainment, with a Sound Transit commuter rail station nearby.*

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When Kent Mayor Suzette Cooke talked to city residents in 2005, she was shocked to hear some people say they hadn't been to downtown Kent in 15 years. Kent Station, the 18-acre mixed-use development that is about to break ground on its fourth phase, has changed that.

“Downtown was sort of becoming forgotten,” Cooke said. “Clearly the reality of Kent Station has helped residents see what's possible for Kent... It was a wake up call to residents that they actually deserved such services.”

Kent Station, owned by Seattle-based Tarragon, is the public-private centerpiece of Kent's effort to revitalize downtown. Before it was built, the site was home to a functioning glue factory. Today, it's a 240,000-square-foot hub of retail, education and entertainment with a Sound Transit commuter rail station nearby. When complete, the project will stretch across 470,000 square feet.

Cooke said the project's size has been crucial. “Kent Station would never have had the impact it has if it hadn't been as large a development.”

Kent Station was conceived in four phases. Phase one and two, completed in 2005 and 2006, had shops, restaurants and a 14-screen AMC cineplex. Kristin Jensen, senior development manager at Tarragon, said that work cost about \$60 million.

Tarragon is skipping phase three for now — a 150-unit housing component — and will develop it at a later date. It is moving instead onto phase four: a \$22 million, 80,000-square-foot education, retail and office building. It should break ground at the end of the month.

That building should be complete by June 2009. Green River Community College will be the anchor tenant, and will occupy about 39,000 square feet across the second and third floors. A two level skybridge will connect the college to its current location in Kent Station. Floor one will be retail and floor four will be an 18,000-square-foot class A office penthouse. Jensen Fey Architecture and Planning is the architect for phase four and GLY is the general contractor.

Green River's expansion will add about 600 new students to the area. Ben Wolters, economic



Photo courtesy John Baker, Mortenson Construction [\[enlarge\]](#)

The \$78 million Kent Events Center, now about halfway done, will house the Seattle Thunderbirds hockey team when it opens in early 2009, and will bring more money to the area.

development director for Kent, said the student growth will bring more vitality and activity into downtown, and build on Kent Station's original purpose to bring people back to downtown Kent, something Wolters said has been achieved.

“Absolutely. It's been a very successful investment that is going to be paying dividends for years to come both in direct tax revenues and in promoting development elsewhere in downtown,” Wolters said



Photo courtesy Kent Station [\[enlarge\]](#)

When complete, Kent Station will total 470,000 square feet.

Heading for Kent

Kurt Hanson, development manager for Kent, said there was no outlet for entertainment in Kent, before Kent Station. People were spending money, but they were spending it in Tukwila and Bellevue. Now Kent residents have a local option. So do people from neighboring cities.

John Hinds, general manager of Kent Station, said the shopping area has made Kent more regionalized. He said friends who live in Auburn and Renton often meet at Kent Station because it is the midpoint between them.

Businesses in Kent Station have been successful. Wolters said the Ram Restaurant and Brewery, and Duke's Chowder House Restaurant are among the top performing restaurants in their respective chains.

Hanson said the 14-screen theatre originally expected to sell between 700,000 and 800,000 tickets a year, a number he called “phenomenal.” Now, the theatre sells close to 1 million tickets a year. “Just think about all those folks, where do they go next? Do they go eat and then go shop?” Hanson said. “That's the expanded tax picture.”

According to Bob Nachlinger, the city's finance director, Kent Station generated \$50.5 million in taxable retail sales between March 2007 and February of this year. Of that, the city of Kent received \$427,553. Without Kent Station, all of those dollars would be spent somewhere else.

The energy of Kent Station is also supporting other development, though so far it is mostly city-sponsored projects. Wolters said the city has supported building the \$78 million Kent Events Center, which is about halfway done. The center will be the home to the Seattle Thunderbirds hockey team when it opens in early 2009, and will bring more money to the area.

Kent also rezoned a block next to the site between Fourth and Fifth avenues and James and Cloudy streets for office/retail and mixed-use. Wolters said there are a number of interested out-of-state developers eyeing sites there for mixed-use housing. The next goal for the city is bringing in a variety of housing to create a real neighborhood.

Bridging the gap

But there's a gap between the success of Kent Station and the historic district two blocks away. Often, shoppers at Kent Station don't realize there are other, unique shops within walking distance.

“One of the continual challenges is how to attract those people that are customers at Kent Station to also be customers in the business in the historic district in downtown Kent,” Wolters said.

To help create a connection, the city is developing Town Square Plaza, a park that will serve as a green space, farmer's market and concert area.

Hinds said Kent Station sees itself as an integrated part the city. Hinds is also on the board of

directors for the Kent Downtown Partnership, a nonprofit dedicated to creating a vibrant downtown. They cross promote shopping and hold events.

Jensen said the strength of the community and its “good roots” were reasons Tarragon chose to develop Kent Station in the first place.

“We don't really want to take anything away from downtown Kent. We want to complement them,” she said. “It's a very rewarding partnership.”

Lessons learned

Looking back, Kent Station's success can seem like a well placed bet. “I'd like to say it has been fun,” Hanson said. “All of us were kind of at the edge of our seats thinking when Kent Station was built... where are the people going to come from?”

Wolters said he's always looking to learn from other cities' experiences. Overall, he said it is important to attract a variety of uses to create the needed dynamic. He said Kent chose to pursue retail and entertainment, then housing. Other communities, like Burien and Federal Way, are doing both at the same time. Working with Sound Transit to develop a commuter station nearby, was also crucial to the project.

Everyone involved with the planning and revitalization effort said the most important part of the project's success was having a clear vision and a plan from the beginning.

Cooke said being clear about what a city wants visitors to experience is important. “What is it that's a pent up demand?” she said. “It's a higher risk if (people) simply look at what they'd like to see there. Look at what is missing.”

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