

Holland's Four-Legged Stool.

The Story of Downtown Revival.

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In February, 2019, I delivered a paper to this club entitled “What Has He Been Smoking?!?” Holland’s Snowmelt System - The Back Story.” The focus of this paper was how the Snowmelt System was developed; the operational challenges with its development; how the Snowmelt System catalyzed future development; and how the System is operated today. The focus of that presentation was the infrastructure.

Tonight, I want to focus on Holland’s four-legged stool. Namely, who were the principal book ends of downtown renewal; what did it take? Who had the vision, and how was it put together?

Today, the City of Holland boasts an award winning downtown. Thriving restaurants, stores, and an ambience second to none. Holland stands in stark contrast to current national trends of closing big box stores, internet sales, and suburban ghost town malls. However, it has not always been this way. In 1987 – 1988, Holland’s downtown showed an old, tired, and ready-to-die commercial area

like many downtowns in America. The retail consumer wanted large malls populated by anchor stores such as Penneys or Sears, with a shopping experience which was enclosed. No snow, no ice, no rain. It was a place to hang out. Many thought that it was time for the funeral of the Holland downtown.

But what was the “pixie dust” which made it work in Holland? Gordon VanWynen, a former President of Hope College, and later with Riverview Development Company, is quoted in Michael Lozon’s book “Vision on Main Street: Holland Downtown’s Resurgence as the Heart of the Community” saying that it was a synthesis of many factors, tangible and intangible, that involved “commitment, relationships, integrity, trust, and a confidence and hope in the future.” Most of all, VanWynen added, it depended on “people of character and good will – willing to give of themselves in accordance with their gifts, responsibilities, and resources to achieve what our forefathers called the common

good.” Doesn’t this sound more like an inspirational statement rather than a developer’s blueprint for success?

So, tonight we are going to focus on four (4) individuals who were instrumental in making the downtown redevelopment happen. The downtown redevelopment happened because of a synthesis of public and private initiatives. Without both, it would not have been successful. Who were these individuals comprising the four-legged stool? They were: Ed Prince, Gordon VanWynen, Mayor Al McGeehan, and City Manager Soren Wolff. There were many others who were instrumental in making the downtown redevelopment occur, such as Bill Johnson, Greg Holcomb, and many other individuals who contributed countless hours on boards and commissions to make this occur. I do not want this paper to minimize the extensive contributions of others, and many of these individuals will be mentioned in context tonight.

Edgar D. Prince (1931 – 1995)

Ed Prince was born in Holland Michigan in 1931. His father, Peter Prince, owned a produce company which supplied stores in west Michigan. Ed Prince was 11 years old when his father died at the age of 36 of a heart attack. Ed entered the University of Michigan's engineering school and earned an engineering degree in 1953. Following graduation, he met Elsa Zwiép, and they were married shortly thereafter. Ed's first job was with Buis Machine Works in Holland as an engineer. In 1965, Prince left Buis Machine and founded Prince Corporation. In 30 years, Prince transformed Prince Corporation into one of the dominant automotive suppliers in the United States. In 1997, following Ed Prince's death at age 63, JCI was sold for \$1.35 billion dollars.

Prince Corporation started its success with the lighted vanity visor. The idea came from Conrad Marcus, the vice president of product development, when Marcus' wife had difficulty applying lipstick in their darkened family car. In 1971,

Marcus made a crude model by filing down a Tupperware dish, attaching a mirror, and a light to a car visor. The idea of a lighted vanity visor was initially turned down by Ford Motor Company. Prince, Marcus, and Spoelhof next met with the head of interior design at GM's Cadillac Division. Cadillac liked the idea, but they wanted to see a prototype. After a prototype was made, Ed Prince calculated the cost of materials and settled on a price that provided a safe profit margin. Ed insisted that if Cadillac would not allow Prince to make the complete visor assembly, they would walk out of their meeting. When Cadillac demanded that very thing, Ed, Marcus, and Spoelhof stood up to leave. Cadillac backed down and ordered 500 visors for the 1972 Cadillac. By 1973, Prince was producing thousands of visors a day, and ramped up production to 60,000 a day, which was enough to supply 43 automotive assembly plants around the world. In 1974, Prince suffered a heart attack at age 42, which caused him to re-evaluate his priorities and his focus turned to Downtown Holland.

Gordon J. VanWynen (1920 – 2020)

While Ed Prince died at a relatively young age of 63, Gordon VanWynen lived for 100 years. In his obituary, it was stated that Gordon VanWynen believed that his ultimate purpose was to be an avenue for God's love, and to realize both individually and in community, the grace known through Jesus Christ. VanWynen grew up in Grand Rapids, graduating from Ottawa Hills High School; attended Calvin University on a 3-2 engineering program with the University of Michigan, and graduated in 1942 with a degree from Calvin and U of M. After graduation, Gordon enlisted in the U.S. Navy receiving a commission as an ensign in 1943. He had a distinguished military service. After the war, Gordon completed a master's degree in engineering at the University of Michigan and a subsequent doctorate at MIT in 1951. He joined the faculty at the University of Michigan, serving as the Dean of the College of Engineering from 1965 – 1972. In 1972, Gordon was appointed as the 9th President of Hope College. He served in this role

until 1987. Upon retirement at the age of 67, Gordon began the longest job of his career (for the next 30 years), working with Holland City officials and community leaders to revitalize Downtown Holland.

Al McGeehan

Al McGeehan was born in Staten Island, New York, and came to Holland in 1962 as a Hope College freshman. Four years after getting a Bachelor's Degree at Hope, he was hired to teach history at Holland High School. In 1975, he ran for Holland City Council and lost, but was elected to City Council two years later. For 32 years, he served the City of Holland, 16 years as "Mayor Al", which was the longest tenure of any mayor in the City's history.

Mayor Al was a consummate cheerleader for the City of Holland and its development. Under his watch, there was a major renovation of City Hall in the late 1990s; the construction of the \$12,000,000 Police Headquarters on east Eighth Street in 2004; the establishment of the Youth Advisory Council, which permitted

high school students to serve on city boards and commissions in a non-voting capacity. He also served the Michigan Municipal League, and from 2006 to 2008 he was President of the Michigan Association of Mayors. Hope College recognized his service by conferring a Distinguished Service Award in 1997.

Soren Wolff

Soren Wolff was City Manager of the City of Holland for 23 years, and another three years as Assistant City Manager. According to the International City/County Management Association, the average city manager serves for six years. Soren immigrated from Denmark, arriving in America at age ___ unable to speak English. Soren is quoted that when he was a senior in college, he did not know what a city manager was. He attended Central College and later received his Masters of Public Administration Degree from Kansas University. Soren was a team-builder who often used the word “we” and “our” during his tenure as City

Manager because he really believed that not individuals, but a team of people put projects together.

So how did these diverse individuals, consisting of an entrepreneurial industrialist; an often philosophical college president; a gregarious high school teacher; and a Danish immigrant city manager put together the mechanism which lead to downtown redevelopment? The bookends were two component parts:

Private industry and development and City government and initiative to form a Public Private Partnership “PPP”;

What was downtown Holland like in 1970-1980?

Downtown Holland was typical of many small towns throughout America. In the 1930s, national chains established stores like Woolworths, Montgomery Ward, JC Penney, and Sears Roebuck. Holland’s downtown was also occupied by family-owned businesses, such as Fris’, Teerman’s, Fabiano’s, Vogelzang’s,

Lokker-Rutgers, and Borr's Bootery. By the 1960s, half of the 2nd floor space was vacant, and in the 1970's, all of the national chain stores were gone.

There were various ideas developed to erect a mall in downtown Holland.

There was a proposal for a pedestrian mall, but federal funding of \$3.2 million dollars fell through. A developer by the name of Ed Havelik proposed a 250,000 sq. ft. enclosed mall in downtown Holland which would have room for 2 anchors, a specialty store, and from 20-40 small shops. This enclosed mall, known as the Holland Center, was proposed for development between 8th and 6th Street, and Central and College Avenues. The Havelik proposal met with mixed reviews among existing downtown merchants who saw such a downtown mall as competition rather than an enhancement to their business interests.

In March, 1988, the Riverview Advisory Committee formed the Riverview Development Limited Partnership, consisting of 22 member investors who contributed \$2,900,000 in cash for the development of the downtown. It was

understood that the partnership constituted a long-term investment, with no assurance of any return. This partnership was the vehicle by which Gordon VanWynen, working with a former Hope College graduate and a graduate of the Harvard School of Planning, Greg Holcomb, began the planning process of downtown development.

One of the major contributions of Gordon VanWynen was persuading William Johnson of Ann Arbor to become involved in the planning and development process for downtown. Bill Johnson was a friend of VanWynen's, and was a master urban landscape architect. Bill is credited with developing a Plan 1987, which integrated the Streetscape Project with the proposed Macatawa River Window on the Waterfront Project, the core downtown area, and the Hope College Campus. Johnson was a master of framework thinking, which involved key public and private sector stakeholders to create a vision for future development. This planning process encouraged both creativity and reflection. Specific project plans

were developed by those responsible, and Bill has been instrumental in shaping downtown strategic plans since 1987. The secret for Bill Johnson was for the downtown not to compete with the mall by recruiting national retail stores, but to offer something entirely different, unique stores and shops locally owned and occupying historic buildings.

In December, 1988, the announcement was made of plans to construct a \$25,000,000 senior citizen complex called “Freedom Village”, a 7 story structure designed to house more than 500 residents. Ed Prince was the principal investor in this project, along with John Tysse, Ron Boeve, and Bill VanderBilt, who had long associations and ties with Hope College. The purpose of this retirement community was to link former alumnae from Hope College with Freedom Village as a retirement community.

In 1987, a group of merchants established the Mainstreet Committee after attending a three day national mainstreet conference which presented blueprints on

successful streetscape projects in other mainstreet communities. The Mainstreet plan was designed to more clearly link the image of a downtown to its architectural past by restoring the original face of buildings. Streetscape plans proposed a sweeping change in the looks of the central business district by adding pedestrian benches, signs, lighting, information booths, landscaping, drinking fountains, waste containers, and bike racks. Streets were to be re-conditioned along with sidewalks and parking lots. The Main Street organization hired Greg Robinson to be its administrator. Greg came from Jackson, Michigan, and was told by business people in Jackson that he should not take a job in Holland Michigan, because those Dutch merchants and business people would never get anything done, because they were too conservative.

In order to pay for the Streetscape Project, which was estimated to cost \$2,100,000, the City needed to issue a municipal bond to provide the up-front money. Seventy percent of the cost would be paid by downtown properties over 10

years, and the remaining thirty percent would come from the general funds of the City. This was the first time that downtown properties were required to have skin in the game for downtown development. This was a significant risk for downtown property owners, since they saw the reality of a decaying downtown.

Most visitors and residents of Holland do not recognize how the downtown property owners paid for public improvements through assessments which were developed by the City of Holland. The Streetscape and Snowmelt projects had a private property component which was assessed to the private property owners by financing which was issued by the City. These assessments included a Streetscape Construction assessment; a Snowmelt Construction assessment; Downtown Property acquisitions for parking; an annual Operating Assessment for Snowmelt; and an Annual Operating Assessment to maintain the parking lots for the downtown. In addition to these assessments, downtown property owners were levied an additional 1 mill by the Downtown Development Authority and

additional taxes for the Principal Shopping District. The bottom line is that downtown properties did and continue to pay the lion share of operating expenses for infrastructure which specially benefits the downtown.

Next came the idea of a snowmelt system in March, 1988. Ed Prince called the City and BPW officials together proposing a system which would take hot water out of the James DeYoung Power Plant on Pine Avenue and pipe the warm water up 8th Street to melt snow. Snowmelt had never been done before by any city. The then City Manager, Terry Hofmeyer, prepared a memo to the Holland City Council summarizing a Snowmelt System. A portion of the Memo stated:

“The concept is very simple and consists of warm water circulating through plastic pipes in the ground under asphalt or concrete. The warm water may be generated by on-site boilers, heat pumps, or cooling water from the power plant.”

Although Snowmelt was called “very simple”, it was not. Riverview, through Ed Prince, immediately pledged \$10,000 to conduct an engineering study to determine the project’s feasibility, and the ability of the community and/or the downtown to finance the project. In April, 1988, the construction of a Snowmelt System was initially estimated to cost \$550,000 from Pine Avenue to the old fire station on East 8th Street. Later, in April, 1988, the cost estimates were substantially increased, resulting in an estimated cost of \$1,095,935. On May 9, 1988, Prince Corporation pledged to contribute the amount of \$250,000 for the Snowmelt Project contingent upon the City Council contributing \$250,000, with the remainder being paid in special assessments by the downtown merchants.

In his book, “Vision on Mainstreet”, Michael Lozon quotes Ed Prince regarding his \$250,000 contribution:

“Having something unique, like Snowmelt, sets a downtown apart.

I was convinced that it was a good idea, and that Holland should have it, but having a good idea was not enough. You had to get people to buy into it. We couldn't have sold the downtown idea without making the offer of the matching \$250,000 donation.”

The idea of Snowmelt was launched, but the project had to have engineering and construction reality to it. Remember what was being proposed, a 250,000 sq. foot snowmelt system circulating water over 60 miles of one inch orange plastic pipes, arranged every 6 inches under the street surfaces and sidewalk brick pavers along 8th Street. To operate the snowmelt system, 1,500 gallons of hot water were pumped, per minute, from 12 inch pipes from the James DeYoung Power Plant to 3 inch pipes, then to 1 inch plastic pipes. The Snowmelt System, as designed, was

supposed to melt 1 inch of snow per hour. The winters in Holland typically have 90-110 inches of snow, with temperatures as low as 20 degrees below zero.

The Holland Board of Public Works, which was supposed to operate the Snowmelt System, voted against building it. In mid-June, 1988, the Holland City Council voted, by a 5-3 vote, to approve it. Ed Prince committed to paying \$25,000 of the annual operating costs for the first 3 years to minimize the costs for the City and downtown property owners. Downtown property owners were once again assessed for annual operating costs of the system. So in 90 days, the idea of Snowmelt was born; approved; and the financial plan worked out. Everyone had their fingers crossed that the Snowmelt System would work. Let's think about the financial numbers in 1988: \$2,100,000 to construct Streetscape, and \$1,100,000 to construct Snowmelt.

Al McGeehan was interviewed by Michigan Public Radio regarding the Snowmelt System in 2016. He stated:

“Back in 1988, when the idea was first launched, it was rocket science to us. We didn’t know anything about it. It had never been done before in the United States. We had no idea, #1, how it worked, how we could hook it up to our power plant. We had no idea how much it was going to cost to create, and the biggest question was how much was it going to cost to operate and maintain it? The majority of the City Council said let’s dare to dream big, and let’s give it a shot.”

In June, 1988, the construction of Streetscape and Snowmelt began. The construction almost bankrupted the downtown. Eighth Street was turned into a war zone, and shoppers did not come downtown, and those that did had to use back door entrances to navigate an obstacle course which included bricks, sand piles, and pipes. It was discovered that there were coal vaults in the sidewalks, which

had been forgotten for years, which had to be filled with dirt and soil to stabilize the sidewalks and the roadbed. Jim Teerman, owner of the Teerman's Department Store, recalled the five month construction period, and said:

“Streetscape was the worst period during the history of the store.

During Streetscape, customers could only use the back door. When you change a person's buying habits, it's time to correct them.

The mall also had an effect, it took almost three years to bring back the sales and customer traffic to pre-Streetscape days.”

When finally concluded, the Snowmelt System was the largest municipally owned Snowmelt System in the United States. After Streetscape and the Snowmelt System was constructed and operational, Ed Prince stated:

“A city never arrives! He declared. It either goes ahead or behind.”

In 1986, Ed and Elsa Prince established Lumir Corporation.

Ed became an active member of the Downtown Development Authority, and Elsa Prince on the Mainstreet Committee. In 1987, Lumir Corporation turned the old Color House Paint Store at 25 West 8th Street into the beautiful Holland Area Arts Council building, and restored the historic Tower Clock Building at River Avenue. Lumir built the 100 E. 8th Street Building, the former site of a Burger King Restaurant, which was later purchased by Hope College for administrative offices and classroom space.

Lumir also started other renovation projects, converting the old JC Penney building, and also converting the Woolworth building into a Bavarian style restaurant called Alpen Rose. As of September, 2010, Lumir had converted and developed 69 downtown buildings.

Lumir was not alone in its vision for downtown. Geenen DeKock Properties restored several buildings and developed the south side of the block from River Avenue to Pine.

The public component of the public/private partnership was the City involvement. The City worked hand-in-glove with private groups and individuals. The City invested more than \$30,000,000 in infrastructure improvements for such projects as Streetscape and Snowmelt, a new public safety and court complex (which involved buying more than 25 parcels of land), the Farmer's Market, the 7th Street parking deck, the Holland Museum, and improving 7th and 9th Streets.

In 1996, the National Civic League named Holland "One of the Ten All-American Cities." In 1997, Holland was awarded the Great American Mainstreet Award by The National Trust for Historic Preservation in recognition of the remarkable renovation of historic buildings.

Today, Holland's Central Business District includes 150 stores, four 3 story office buildings, a five story boutique City Flats Hotel, the Central Avenue Financial Center on the corner of 7th Street and Central Avenue, and the Bank of Holland (now Citibank). Lumir renovated the former JB Labs Building. Riverview Partners "superblock" on the north side of Eighth Street between College and Columbia Avenues includes the 85 Plaza Center, the Plaza East Office Buildings, and the Macatawa Bank building.

Even though the development of downtown holland was a tremendous success, the strategic planning continues. Lakeshore Advantage, the Holland-Zeeland Strategic Leadership Forum, continues to analyze and look at where Holland is going as a community. So where does the continued growth and development of the downtown appear to be moving? In the spring of 2023, the voters of the City of Holland voted to permit a potential land swap of the James DeYoung Power Plant property with VerPlank's, which could develop a mixed-use

commercial/residential facility immediately adjacent to Boatwerks. A myriad of details need to be resolved regarding this development project, but once again it becomes part of the “PPP” (public, private, partnership) for downtown development. Only the future will tell what will be developed; however, the site, the vision, and the community initiative are there, evidenced by the approval of 64% of Holland City residents.

In conclusion, I can only echo the comments of Gordon VanWylen relating to how downtown development occurred. Holland’s downtown revival was dependent on a four legged stool: Ed Prince, Gordon VanWylen, Al McGeehan, and Soren Wolff. The development of the downtown was truly a synthesis of tangible and intangible factors. It was the result of “people of character and good will – willing to give of themselves in accordance with their gifts, responsibilities, and resources to achieve what our forefathers called the common good”.

Now, before we open to questions, I want to take you on a short photographic tour of the Downtown to see the reality of what happened.