

## Columbus Commons

*By Amy Taylor*

### THE EVOLUTION FROM A DESOLATE MALL TO A PREMIER PARK

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At six acres, Columbus Commons features beautiful gardens, a hand-carved carousel, two cafés with plentiful seating, manicured lawns, and a performing arts pavilion. The park is home to almost 250 events annually and has truly become "Downtown's Playground". In addition, Columbus Commons has served as a catalyst for redevelopment in the neighborhood, as almost \$300 million of private investment has been completed, is under construction or has been announced. It took bold leadership to see the vision for downtown and thanks to strong public-private partnerships, Columbus Commons is a crowning jewel in downtown's crown.

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# columbus commons

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Photo credit: Randall Lee Scriber Photography

Columbus Commons – June 2014 Stone Soul Picnic

**t**he leadership in Columbus, Ohio, faced an important question in 2007...what to do with an underutilized enclosed mall that took up nine acres in the heart of downtown. Could this site be repurposed? How could it be re-engaged in the neighborhood that had developed around it?

The transformation from City Center Mall to Columbus Commons is an urban success story, which began when the mall developer failed to meet their obligations and Capitol South Community Urban

Redevelopment Corporation was granted control of the site. Capitol South undertook a year-long planning effort to determine the best use for the site – one that was both economically feasible and possible to construct. After many iterations and concepts were considered, the plan to create a mixed-use development, anchored by a large green space, was announced in February 2009. Two years later in May 2011, the first phase of Columbus Commons – a greenspace featuring formal gardens, a carousel, cafes, and a large grand lawn to host hundreds of annual events – officially opened to the community. The Columbus Bicentennial Pavilion, a permanent stage and pavilion, opened a year later.

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**Amy Taylor** is the chief operating officer of the Columbus Downtown Development Corporation & Capitol South Community Urban Redevelopment Corporation, Columbus, Ohio. (ataylor@downtowncolumbus.com)

## THE EVOLUTION FROM A DESOLATE MALL TO A PREMIER PARK

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*A snapshot of what Columbus Commons looked like when the City Center Mall was still standing*

But that was just the beginning. When the Columbus Commons mixed-use development is complete, the site will be ringed with residential and commercial buildings, all anchored by a six-acre greenspace.

The Columbus Downtown Development Corporation (CDDC) and Capitol South operate Columbus Commons, and with nearly 250 events each year it lives up to its name of being “Downtown’s Playground.” CDDC and Capitol South are private, non-profit development organizations led by a single Board of Directors comprised of senior business and institutional leaders. Together, both organizations are strongly committed to downtown revitalization.

### THE EVOLUTION

At the time of its opening in 1989, City Center was Central Ohio’s largest and most upscale shopping mall, featuring 1.2 million square feet and three levels of premier shopping with more than 200 stores – it was truly a destination. More than 5 million people walked through the doors during its first three months of operation and people from 31 states visited in the first year.

City Center connected to the Lazarus Department Store but never connected or engaged with the rest of downtown. People would park in a covered garage, walk through a covered walkway to a windowless mall, and never set foot on a downtown street. So while City Center thrived, the rest of downtown Columbus died.

City Center’s decline occurred for multiple reasons. The mall transitioned from the original mall developer to other, less involved mall developers, who looked at this property simply as one small piece of their portfolio. Suburban malls were built in the surrounding areas, so City Center was no longer the only shopping option.

In 2002, the city of Columbus identified the need to attract and retain residents and businesses downtown. The city tapped CDDC and Capitol South to help achieve this goal, and encouraging a strong use for the City Center site was at the top of the list. Fast-forward to 2007. The



*Demolition of the City Center Mall*

mall was basically vacant, except for some small eateries. At this point, City Center Mall was transferred to a new owner, as part of their purchase of a large mall property portfolio. The new mall owner decided that City Center wasn’t a critical part of their portfolio and they defaulted on their lease. Their default allowed Capitol South to regain possession of the mall.

Be careful what you wish for...Capitol South had a lot to learn about the site. We engaged engineering and architectural experts. We reviewed multiple concepts. We had to determine if it was better to keep the mall and adapt its use or to tear it down and start with a clean, green slate.

We gathered public input, and we heard all kinds of ideas, from the traditional view of creating a neighborhood to the more creative suggestions, such as an indoor ski slope or building a replica of Christopher Columbus’s Genoa, Italy.

While the community was hoping for a solution and development plan immediately, we decided it was more important to be right than quick. We did our due diligence and once we put all the pieces of the puzzle together, we decided a mixed-use development, anchored by a

### BASIC COLUMBUS FACTS:

**Location:** Columbus is located near the center of the state of Ohio and is the county seat of Franklin County.

**Population:** Columbus is the capital and largest city in Ohio. It is the 15th largest city in the U.S., with a population of 835,957 according to the US Census Bureau.

**Industries:** The city has a diverse economy and is home to The Ohio State University, one of the largest universities in the U.S.; the Battelle Memorial Institute, the world’s largest private research and development foundation; Chemical Abstracts Service, the world’s largest clearinghouse of chemical information; and NetJets, the world’s largest fractional ownership jet aircraft fleet.

park, was the best option. Based on all of the knowledge we had gained and opinions that had been shared, we created a set of guiding principles:

- High Street. Prime Importance of High Street Frontage for Residential (High Street is the main thoroughfare running North/South through downtown).
- Public Spaces. Establish “Gathering Center(s)” as Anchor Element(s) of Redevelopment.
- Density. Create buildings with “Bulk and Height” consistent with market economics.
- Retail. Strive to establish retail/restaurant concentration along High Street centered upon new “Columbus Commons construction” and Lazarus Building frontage.
- Phased Development. Recognize that redevelopment is likely to be a 5-10 year undertaking, and possibly longer, with the most likely initial phase being High Street residential development.

Creating Columbus Commons was a team effort led by Capitol South, an organization with a proud tradition of creating spaces that draw people downtown. Other team members include: the Georgetown Company, the site’s development manager; and a design/build team composed of construction manager Corna-Kokosing, architects Moody Nolan, and landscape architects EDGE Group.

Like most of the changes that have been made as part of downtown Columbus’s rebirth, Columbus Commons was funded through a combination of public and private partnerships. The mall was demolished, and the site was prepared for development through funds coordinated by Capitol South. Franklin County Commissioners and the Franklin County Metro Parks financially supported the creation of the park, which included six acres of greenspace, 12 garden beds, a bosque of trees, and two café buildings. A world-class pavilion, which has hosted the likes of Ben Folds, Gladys Knight, Idina Menzel, and Michael McDonald, was similarly funded, with the City of Columbus making the lead gift of \$2 million and the private sector providing an additional \$3 million in contributions. The annual operating expenses of Columbus Commons are provided through Capitol South, via



The newest development, Two25, stands just southeast of Columbus Commons

## PAVILION SPONSORS

City of Columbus	\$2,000,000
AEP	\$1,000,000
Nationwide	\$1,000,000
Huntington	\$250,000
Cardinal Health	\$100,000
Limited Brands Foundation	\$100,000
State Auto	\$100,000
Robert F. Wolfe and Edgar T. Wolfe Foundation	\$100,000
Big Lots	\$75,000
Columbia Gas	\$50,000
Crane Group	\$25,000
Momentive Specialty Chemicals	\$25,000
Motorist Insurance Group	\$25,000
PNC	\$25,000
Joseph A. Jeffrey Endowment Fund	\$20,000
Grange Insurance	\$10,000

## PARK SPONSORS

Capitol South	\$15,000,000
Franklin County Commissioners	\$3,000,000
Franklin County Metro Parks	\$2,000,000

parking revenues. This supports more than 180 internal events that are free to the public, and the coordination of an additional 60 external events, as well as the annual maintenance and care of the park and pavilion.

## A DOWNTOWN REVIVAL

Columbus Commons is a key component of a transformation envisioned nearly ten years ago for downtown Columbus in the Downtown Strategic Business Plan. The goal was to bring economic, cultural, and aesthetic benefits to the area; increase private investment in the downtown housing market; and catalyze the resurgence of the downtown office market. The Commons has not only helped achieve these goals, but the impact of its

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## TIMELINE FOR DEVELOPMENT OF COLUMBUS COMMONS

**2007** CDDC & Capitol South reacquired the failing City Center Mall.

**2008** Capitol South worked with multiple national and local consultants to determine the best use of the site. Multiple plans were considered.

**2009** CDDC & Capitol South announced the creation of the Columbus Commons development where City Center Mall stood. Columbus Commons is a mixed-use development, filled with privately developed residential, retail and commercial space, all anchored by a public greenspace.

**2011** The park opened to the public.

**2012** The pavilion opened to the public.

**2013** Highpoint on Columbus Commons opened on the west side of the park, featuring 5 stories with 302 apartments and street-level retail.

**2015** Plans were announced for the final phase of the Commons, called Two25 Commons. The development will be a 12-story, mixed-use building on the southeast corner of the park.

development has exceeded expectations. We've known from national case studies, including Bryant Park in New York and Millennium Park in Chicago, that greenspace serves as a catalyst for economic development and private investment. We no longer have to look far for proof. Columbus Commons, paired with the Scioto Mile (another Capitol South project along the riverfront, just two blocks west of the Commons), serves as a critical component that's led to almost \$300 million in private investment in the RiverSouth District, the micro-neighborhood that encompasses both parks.

Nationally-renowned development company Carter completed 302 new residential units with 23,000 square feet of ground-level retail space at Highpoint on Columbus Commons in 2013. The project is on a portion of the Commons site originally allocated for market-driven development. As of January 2016, the apartment complex is 95 percent leased.

Capitalizing on the development boom downtown, in July 2015 the 250 South High building came online at High and Main/Rich streets, directly southwest of Columbus Commons. Capitol South owned the lot and decided it was the right investment to make in the RiverSouth neighborhood. Seattle- and Columbus-based architecture firm NBBJ teamed up with Daimler and Kaufman Development to create 250 High – a 12-story mixed-use development featuring ground floor retail space, five floors of commercial office space, and six floors of 156 residential units.

Lifestyle Communities, a locally-owned residential development company, got into the downtown housing market early, completing over 200 market rate residential units as construction began on the Commons. Lifestyle Communities is now working on two new residential buildings with ground-floor retail flanking the southwest corner of Columbus Commons: The Annex II is an eight-story building with ground-floor retail, featuring 106 apartments, and the Annex III is projected to be a ten-story building, featuring 137 apartments. Both projects are currently under construction.

The final piece for completing development around Columbus Commons is in place, as plans were announced in May 2015 for a 12-story, mixed-use building on the southeast corner of the park. This will be an important piece for the continued revitalization of downtown. The Daimler Group and Kaufman Development will build Two25 Commons, a \$60 million project similar to their nearby 12-story 250 High project under construction (mentioned earlier). Two25 will feature retail space on the first floor, office space on the next five floors, and 170 residential units on the top six floors.

With the residential housing market in downtown Columbus expanding rapidly and experiencing very low vacancy rates (see chart), the downtown office market has also expanded, despite the recent recession and tough competition from suburban markets. And perhaps most rewarding of all is that downtown Columbus once again feels like a thriving and unique neighborhood; area bars and restaurants overflow on weekends; visitors enjoy diverse and free events at downtown's cultural institutions and parks; and the population continues to grow – all as a result of the public-private investment in the area, including Columbus Commons.

## DOWNTOWN AT A GLANCE:

- Current number of residents that live downtown: 7,471
- Number of workers/daytime population: 81,731 (2011 US Census estimate)
- Office vacancy rates:
  - 13.6% (Class A&B only)
- Residential vacancy rates: approximately 5%
- Downtown population in 2005, 2010, and 2015
  - 2005: 4,400
  - 2010: 6,000
  - 2015: 7,471

Source: Capital Crossroads & Discovery Special Improvement Districts  
Mid-Year 2015 Downtown Columbus Economic Development Report



May 2014 Family Funday event

## BUILDING A BRAND

This year marks our sixth season at Columbus Commons. There has been a transition in real-time from skepticism to success. The apprehension stemmed from a perception that a downtown park in Columbus, Ohio, would fail – whether it was because of safety or programming or funding. The community wasn't sure there would be an audience who desired a downtown park. Would people show up? Would people feel safe? Would families come back downtown? The resounding answer to all of these questions is yes!

Our park patrons are as wide and varied as our downtown. We've developed a space that is safe, fun, and active. More so, we've created a sense of place, where there wasn't one. We produce events for the entire community and people have taken notice. Our events are strongly attended and often times, people will just stop by the park to see what's going on, without prior knowledge of the specific programming. The park is helping our community create memories.

Columbus Commons is utilized by both passive and active users, although the design of the park creates unique challenges. For instance, Columbus Commons is actually a green roof. The design and use of the park is, in large part, dictated by this unusual engineering feat. The formal gardens that line the central lawns are designed and maintained by Columbus's own Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens. Each winter the gardens are redesigned for the coming spring, highlighting new plants and dynamic combinations of greenery and flowers.

At the southern end of the Commons near the carousel are tables and chairs for the casual visitor; families taking advantage of the outdoor reading room open during the late spring, summer, and early fall; as well as customers of the local eateries featured in the park's two cafés – Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams and Tortilla Street Food. There are also permanently affixed benches throughout the park; and during the spring, summer, and fall, the

café tables and chairs are augmented with weather-proof rocking chairs.

Large LED video screens on either side of the Columbus Bicentennial Pavilion stage at the northern end of the Commons provide passive recreationalists information about upcoming events in the park and ways to get involved. The pavilion offers a signature architectural element to the Commons and provides a professional-caliber performance space for local, regional, and national musical acts.

The park is intensively used throughout the summer, connecting to a larger network of green spaces in the area, and is programmed for maximum appeal. Programming is central, and the large, flexible space allows for many types of events ranging in size from a small birthday party to a large half marathon finish-line celebration. With more than 250 events annually, it is filled with people, enjoying a green oasis surrounded by skyscrapers.

The Commons meets its billing as "Downtown's Playground" by providing opportunities for the community to see national musical performances, like Bastille, Ben Folds, Blues Traveler, Gin Blossoms, and Lynyrd Skynyrd, and serves as the summer home of the Columbus Symphony Orchestra. In October 2013, the park hosted the Opening Ceremony of the Presidents Cup – an international golf tournament. For the first time in Presidents Cup's history, the Opening Ceremony was held at a location separate from the golf tournament. Golf Network viewers around the globe were able to watch the Opening Ceremonies at the Commons. Engaging long-term residents and new visitors to downtown is a key goal of the park.

Daily, from late spring through early fall, the Columbus Commons Reading Room – an outdoor space featuring reading materials for all ages, from novels to picture books – draws adults and children alike. All are welcome to peruse the collection, and the space is attended by a Commons staff member. Free fitness classes are offered five days a week; and weekly summer events include a Food Truck Food Court at lunchtime, a series of local

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Photo credit: Randall Lee Sieber Photography

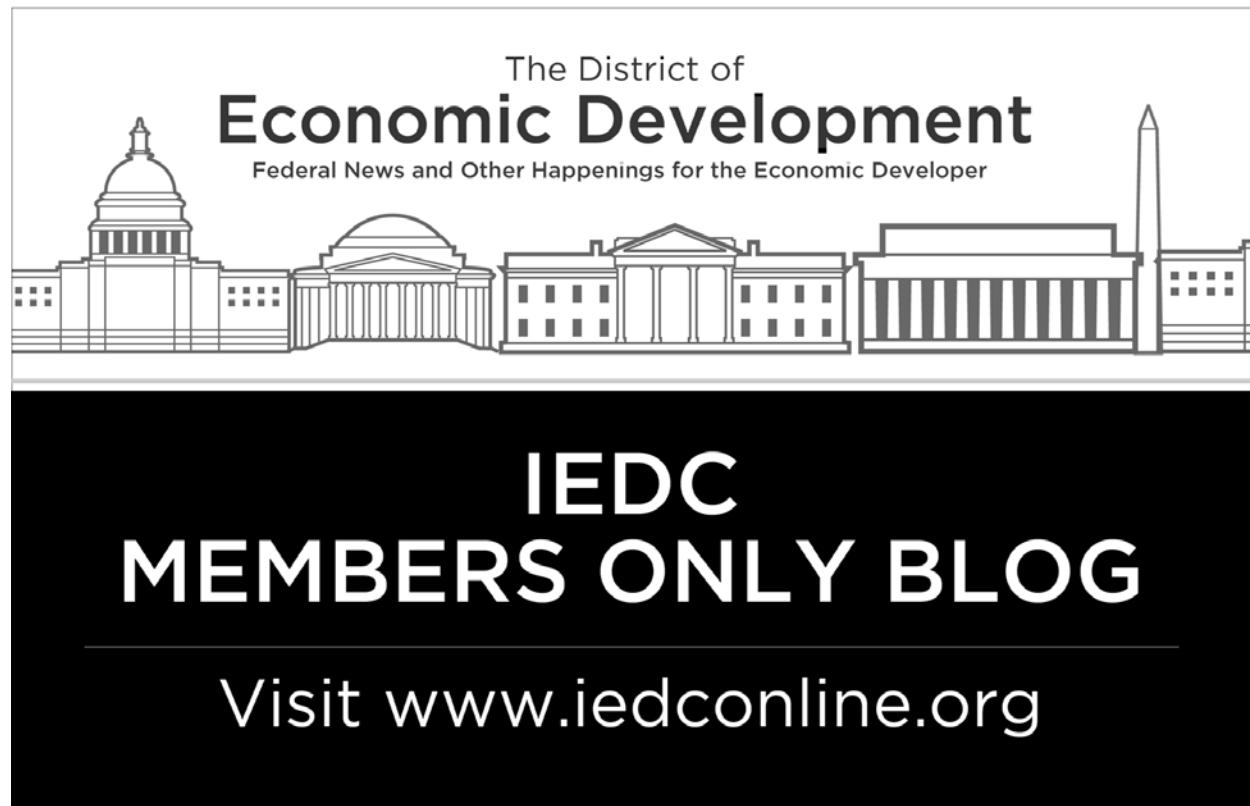
July 2015 free Pepsi Concert, featuring Bastille

bands in July, kickball, and special days for kids. In the fall, the Commons hosts the Harvest Fair – featuring a pumpkin patch, bands, and games galore for children. The event feels different than suburban fairs, as visitors “pick” pumpkins while surrounded by skyscrapers. During the holiday season, Columbus Commons is lit by more than 200,000 colorful lights. A hand-carved carousel, bocce courts, life-size chess set, and a NEOS 360 electronic playground add to the permanent features of the park.

Capitol South has tried a lot of new programming ideas – some are wildly successful and some are less so. We encourage event experimentation because that's how

we learn what fits in our community. As our neighborhood evolves with more residential and office neighbors, we are strategically choosing events that are a right fit. Our fans email and comment often about ideas they have or elements that they would like to see changed, and we take that feedback seriously.

Columbus Commons represents change for the better, a safe place for families to enjoy our wonderful downtown, and for the opportunity for residential neighbors to enjoy their new backyard. ☺



The graphic features a white header section with a black and white line drawing of the U.S. Capitol building and other Washington, D.C. landmarks. The text "The District of Economic Development" is written in a serif font, with "Federal News and Other Happenings for the Economic Developer" in a smaller sans-serif font below it. Below this is a black section with the text "IEDC MEMBERS ONLY BLOG" in large, bold, white sans-serif letters. At the bottom, the text "Visit [www.iedconline.org](http://www.iedconline.org)" is displayed in a large, white sans-serif font.