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Theater called catalyst for downtown

Official sees possibility of outdoor dining

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WORCESTER — The company he leads has donated \$2 million to the city's renovated downtown theater and offered another \$1 million in a matching grant. Now Frederick H. Eppinger wants to see the rest of Main Street take off.

In a speech to the annual meeting of Preservation Worcester last night at the Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts, Mr. Eppinger, the president and chief executive of Worcester-based Hanover Insurance Group Inc., said the restored performing arts center and the crowds it draws can be a catalyst for the development of restaurants, some with outdoor dining, on Main Street.

"People that go to the theater spend money, and people who spend money attract retail," he said during a talk on the theater's second floor.

Some buildings on Main Street are beautiful, some buildings have not been cared for and some have been altered to diminish their beauty, Mr. Eppinger told the group. Over the next 18 months, however, he expects development spawned by the theater to become apparent.

Attracting businesses and residents to Worcester will be crucial to that development, he said in an interview after his speech.

"It will come. Is it easy? No, particularly in a downtown," Mr. Eppinger said. "It will happen."

Mr. Eppinger's speech came as the theater, the former Poli Palace Theatre built in 1926, moved into its third month of performances. The theater was renovated at costs likely to reach \$32 million, according to Mr. Eppinger. It needs to book about 100 performances a year to break even, has nearly reached that level for its first year and could be booking 200 to 250 performances a year in the next few years, he said.

The theater, and the experience that audiences have attending performances, promises to alter the image of Worcester, particularly among those who might have drawn their conclusions of the city simply by driving past on Interstate 290, he said.

People "will all think about our city differently," he told Preservation Worcester members. "It will be an image of a world-class place."

Mr. Eppinger's prediction that downtown Worcester will begin to see spinoff development as

a result of the theater within 18 months is realistic, said Timothy J. McGourthy, Worcester director of economic development.

"We're already seeing lots of expressions of interest," Mr. McGourthy said. "Making sure those materialize into something concrete is key."

Involvement from the private sector will be critical, too, Mr. Eppinger said. Through Choose Worcester, a city marketing initiative, efforts continue to attract companies to the city, he said.

That kind of development would mark a change from the big, government-funded development projects in Worcester in recent years that proposed to revitalize the city's urban core.

Mr. Eppinger said he believes the private sector has to carry development forward.

"I don't think incremental (development) is necessarily slow," he said. "It's just not, 'Let's wait for the perfect thing.'"