

OAKLAND COUNTY

# Pontiac 'teetering' toward revival. Can county investment make it the next Royal Oak?



**Hannah Mackay**

The Detroit News

Published 11:00 p.m. ET Aug. 12, 2024 | Updated 11:00 p.m. ET Aug. 12, 2024

*Pontiac* — Plans to bring 700 county employees from a dozen and a half different departments to downtown Pontiac by the spring of 2026 are moving forward, with local Democrats hopeful the influx of workers will be a catalyst for the county seat's rebirth, while critics say the move is unnecessary.

Oakland County Executive Dave Coulter said construction and development firms are being interviewed now as part of an ambitious redevelopment plan for Pontiac he announced in the spring of 2023, with bids expected to be awarded next month. The project involves moving employees across 18 departments from the county's current campus on the border of Pontiac and Waterford Township to two office buildings in downtown Pontiac.

Demolition of the Phoenix Center parking deck and amphitheater, which hasn't hosted a concert since 2011, also could begin by the end of the year, paving the way for the northern and southern portions of Saginaw Street to be rejoined.

Coulter said the potential in Pontiac, which has faced a series of challenges over the last 20 years, including having an emergency manager from 2009-13, is "unlimited." He's optimistic that it will be transformed into a bustling, active downtown within the next five to 10 years.

"(It's) not just about moving employees that can work and shop and eat downtown, but that it would be ... a sign to developers that downtown Pontiac is a good bet," said Coulter, a Democrat. "I am very optimistic about the future of Pontiac broadly, and the downtown in particular, and like I said, not just because of the 700 county employees that we're bringing, but because of the broader economic activity that we're already starting to see happen there."

But some county Republicans are not so sure, and say the move is unnecessary. Commissioner Bob Hoffman, R-Highland, doesn't think the move will spur economic development for the city.

"To create economic development, people have to want to go there. They have to want to invest there and the way you do that is through lower crime rates, blight abatement, and all those things," Hoffman said. "I do believe Pontiac has great potential. The housing situation is getting better, they're building some new things down there, but everything in life is evolution. It's got to evolve and I've always believed that you can't push the market."

Pontiac's Mayor Tim Greimel, on the other hand, says the move will be "hugely impactful."

"No longer having a (Phoenix Center) parking garage obstruct Saginaw Street, which is the city of Pontiac's Main Street, that will allow for more traffic that is northbound on Woodward to flow into our downtown, rather than being circumvented around our downtown, which should help better sustain downtown businesses," Greimel said.

Pontiac's local government is largely supportive of the plans, with the nonpartisan City Council voting unanimously in favor of the move last year, Council President Mike McGuinness said. But the change cannot happen in a vacuum, he added.

"The really exciting dynamic is that there's new housing development, conversion of historic buildings for adaptive reuse, that are also happening in tandem along with reconfiguration of the Woodward loop," McGuinness said.

## Progress update

In the 14 months since the project was announced, plans have started to take shape and move forward.

Two vacant office buildings, Ottawa Tower at 5111 Woodward and a former General Motors building at 31 E. Judson, along with several nearby vacant plots of land and the Phoenix Center parking garage and amphitheater were purchased by the county last August.

The state allocated \$50 million to the project in its 2023-24 budget while the county contributed \$10 million in American Rescue Plan Act funding to purchase the land. The purchase and allocation of ARPA funds was approved by the county Board of Commissioners along partisan lines last July, with Democrats in favor and Republicans opposed.

One year later, the county has awarded contracts for architecture and community engagement firms and is currently interviewing candidates for construction companies and development teams, Coulter said. No construction has taken place yet.

Eventually, more than 700 employees will move to the downtown Pontiac offices, including the Board of Commissioners; the departments of veteran services; fiscal services; economic development; human resources; neighborhood and housing development; and Coulter himself.

Hoffman said he would move his office if he had to, but doesn't think the project is necessary.

"We have a beautiful complex right now, which is in Pontiac ... on Telegraph," Hoffman said. "I just think the complex we're in is beautiful. It's easily accessible. It's a one-stop shop."

But proponents of the move to downtown Pontiac say the county's current offices need more than \$550 million in critical repairs. By relocating up to 600 employees and consolidating three existing buildings into one instead, Oakland will avoid up to \$54 million in costs that would have to be done to make current buildings up-to-code for continued occupancy, they say.

## Other development

Oakland County's plans to move its employees come as other development projects also are underway across the city, Greimel said. The former Pontiac State Bank building at 28 N. Saginaw, which was historically used for commercial and office space, is currently being renovated into residential units, he said.

"(It's) a beautiful historic building ... for a long time it was not fully utilized," McGuinness said. "That's going to be a game changer."

Outside of the downtown footprint, a redevelopment project also is underway at the Casa Del Rey apartments, a historic, Art Deco building that has also been vacant for years, Greimel said.

And Lighthouse, a Pontiac-based social services organization, also announced three new affordable housing projects within the city this spring, including a new five-story building on Auburn Road with 54 units.

"We have always said that we want more housing for everybody of all different kinds of income levels here in the city of Pontiac, and we are well on our way to accomplishing that," Greimel said. "Some of that is independent of the county's move, but some of it is clearly encouraged and supported by the county's move."

The key to downtown Pontiac's success is foot traffic from residents and employees, Greimel said.

"Between the county's investment and the residential investments ... we are going to have a lot more foot traffic downtown, and that will inject new vitality into our downtown businesses and restaurants," Greimel said.

Pontiac's largest employer, United Wholesale Mortgage, moved its headquarters to Pontiac in 2018 and now has more than 8,000 employees working on-site, every day at its 200-acre campus, said Lee Jelenic, UWM's chief innovation officer and head of government relations. Oakland County moving in and demolishing the Phoenix Center parking garage will be a boon to downtown, Jelenic said.

"Pontiac ... it's got great bones, and it can be a great city again," Jelenic said. "Like anything, when there's more jobs and more people ... that sheds opportunity in an economic cycle where there'll be demand for more restaurants, there'll be more retail, there'll be more demand for housing, so it'll be good for everything."

## **Phoenix Center demolition**

One key part of the county's plans is the demolition of the Phoenix Center, a multi-story parking garage with an amphitheater on top. Built in the 1970s, the garage splits Saginaw Street and Pontiac's downtown into non-continuous sections. Drivers are directed around downtown on the Woodward loop as opposed to through it.

While the amphitheater has hosted some iconic shows, most recently Wiz Khalifa and Big Sean in August 2011, it has since fallen into disrepair.

After demolition, the county will preserve at least two acres of public space that can serve as a town square, Greimel said. Creating a more pedestrian-friendly outdoor space for performances will facilitate bigger and better events than the Phoenix Center currently does, he said.

"The original concept behind the Phoenix Center parking garage that's being demolished is that the roof of that used to serve as an amphitheater, but that was never ideal to have that space on top of a parking garage," Greimel said. "We're very excited about bringing that space to ground level, which is more pedestrian friendly."

The county's entire project is expected to cost between \$120 million and \$130 million. With no funds allocated towards it in Coulter's proposed 2024-25 budget, he's expecting gap financing from a public-private partnership to develop the new public space. The county is currently in the process of evaluating developer proposals.

"It is our expectation that that piece will be a public, private partnership where developers will also have skin in the game and help us close that gap," Coulter said.

## **Community feedback**

This is not the first attempt at revitalizing Pontiac's downtown. The original "Pontiac Plan" was adopted in the 1970s and prompted the construction of the Phoenix Center.

Karen Jorgensen of Pontiac owns two downtown properties that include the Pontiac Little Art Theatre, the Green Room Cafe, and four studio and loft residential spaces. She suggested revisiting a plan proposed by the Congress for New Urbanism, an urban planning company, along with local officials and planning consultants in 2016. The plan recommends a phased demolition of the Phoenix Center over several decades while using its roof deck for recreation.

"We could revitalize this structure in phases with minimal negative impact upon the local businesses as it was constructed in five sections," Jorgensen said. "We need more visible and inviting signage at the four main entrances into the downtown from the Woodward Loop (leading from Water, Pike, and Lawrence Streets) as opposed to tearing down the Phoenix Center to bring traffic into the downtown."

The move of at least 700 county employees is needed, though, to rejuvenate Pontiac's downtown, Jorgensen said.

"It's an amazing historic area that is just waiting to be revitalized to its maximum," Jorgensen said.

Timing will be key, Jorgensen added.

"We can't bring a flood of people down here with nothing to do, or no place to live, or no place to shop," Jorgensen said. "Planning is of (the) essence, to make this perfect marriage happen. And we need the people that are going to be a part of planning to really ... engage themselves with people that already have a history here."

The downtown is missing essentials such as a grocery store, pharmacy, banks, a party store and corner diner, Jorgensen said, pointing out that the Bank of America there will close in November.

Coulter said the county is emphasizing community engagement. One event will take place from 6-8 p.m. Wednesday at the Bowens Senior Citizens Center on Bagley Street.

"We want to know what the people of Pontiac, what the businesses downtown, what the residents and community leaders want to see there," Coulter said. "I didn't want to just assume that we know what's best. This is their community, and we want it to be something that they can be proud of."

Elyria Robinette, co-owner of the Electric Love Tattoo shop, is excited to hear that developments are happening. The shop has been open on Saginaw Street for almost three years and she feels like nothing has changed in the downtown.

"I see other cities pop up and develop and like, it all happens so fast ... like Hazel Park and Royal Oak and Ferndale," Robinette said. "This has the potential to be like that."

She was particularly excited about the Phoenix Center demolition and plans to reconnect the northern and southern portions of Saginaw Street. She typically doesn't see a lot of foot traffic, unless there's a special event happening downtown, and noted that there aren't many businesses open either.

"I feel like, right now there's not a ton of people coming downtown because they get on the (Woodward) loop and they just hurry up and go around," Robinette said. "A lot of those spaces (downtown) have been empty the whole time we've been there."

Vincent Nieves, manager of the Liberty Bar, a longtime LGBTQ+ friendly establishment, said it feels like the city is on the verge of a revival.

"I think it's about time, we need the support down here," Nieves said. "We haven't been opened up on Saturdays for a long time, just because, we don't have the same crowd impact or foot traffic because of the loss of businesses and companies that aren't here anymore."

There are several restaurants within a five to 10-minute walking distance from the county's new buildings, and Nieves hopes the people who work there will venture out for lunch and social hours after work.

"We've had this teetering off point where businesses come in a stick around for a little bit, but it seems to be just very very level since COVID," Nieves said. "I think Pontiac is one of those ... hidden gems. There's so much history down here that people don't know about and I think it would be a great loss to not recognize that, or acknowledge it, or actually bring it back."

*hmackay@detroitnews.com*