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UP FRONT

Downtown Milwaukee needs to up its game: Report

SUBSCRIBER CONTENT: May 15, 2015, 5:00am CDT



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With an arena/entertainment district and streetcar system in the works for downtown Milwaukee, a new study found the city's central business district falls short of peer-group cities in most categories.

The study measured downtown Milwaukee's entertainment and hospitality offerings. The cities in the comparison were: Chicago; Nashville, Tenn.; Kansas City, Mo.; Portland, Ore.; Pittsburgh; Salt Lake City; Cincinnati; St. Louis; Baltimore; Indianapolis; and Charlotte. N.C.

The Greater Milwaukee Committee and Milwaukee Downtown Business Improvement District No. 21 hired Hunden Strategic Partners, Chicago, to conduct the analysis. The Public Policy Forum will host a sold-out panel discussion on the report May 18 at the Intercontinental Hotel.

Categories where Milwaukee ranked below average among peer-group cities were: convention center, inexpensive restaurants, sports venues and seats — due to Miller Park's non-downtown location — largest convention hotel and walkable quality hotel packages.

Milwaukee ranked average in upscale restaurants, walkability, and entertainment and proximity to demand generators.

Downtown Milwaukee is healthy overall and on an expansion track, the Hunden report said. However, the categories where Milwaukee is weak will require attention if the city's downtown is to strengthen its competitiveness, the report said.

"The area immediately around the Wisconsin Center and Bucks arena is lacking obvious dining and other options," the study said.

While Milwaukee matches the average for high-end restaurants, its downtown includes far

fewer restaurants at every other price level, the study found. The Wisconsin Center convention hall and hotels within walking distance “are both extremely undersized,” the report said.

As for bright spots, the report found that Milwaukee, for its size, has a wide variety of boutique historical and cutting-edge hotels. The city’s downtown area also features what the report calls “a strong cluster of stage/concert venues and seats” that Milwaukee should promote to local residents and visitors.

The downtown streetcar will address one concern raised in the Hunden study: Connectivity of nightlife and dining zones in and around the downtown area, the firm said. Better transportation links are necessary to connect Brady Street, the 3rd Ward and sections of the central part of downtown.

Downtown comparison

Milwaukee’s downtown ranks average or below average in most categories when compared with 10 similar cities in the United States:

Convention center size: Smallest

Inexpensive restaurants: Least

Interesting boutique hotels: Among highest

Largest convention hotel: Just below average

Sports venues and seats: Below average

Stage theater and concert seats: Highest

Upscale restaurants: Average

Walkability: Average

Source: Hunden Strategic Partners

Senior Reporter Rich Kirchen covers health care, sports business, politics and media/advertising for the Milwaukee Business Journal.