

The Good Life: Midtown ice rink – and the cooperation – have been magical

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Second Saturday was an ideal, almost-Victorian evening. People wore heavy coats, gloves and hats, and seemed genuinely happy just to be outside.

Ground zero of that, at 20th at J streets, was the festive, lively, movie scene of an ice rink. Around 8 p.m., the rink swarmed with more than 100 people, some skating, some sitting along the edge, some pinwheeling and flopping.

On a platform above one end, the Sacramento Youth Band played standards. On all sides people meandered, hung out, or high-fived the costumed, wandering Mr. Pickle. People looking on covered the MARRS building deck.

With big, bare sycamore trees framing the rink, the warm lights all around, the people, the dogs, the coats, the music, the cold night air, Mr. Pickle, this place at this moment was pure magic.

An ice rink, apparently, can do that. Who knew?

By any measure – skaters, money, business boost, buzz or, simply enough, fun – the midtown ice rink has been a huge success.

The rink closes for the season at 10 p.m. Monday. For the 2010 holidays, it will go back to its permanent home at Seventh and K streets. Is that a good thing? Not sure. But the story is complicated, and there are no bad guys in this tale, so let's start with some background.

St. Rose of Lima Park on K Street has been the rink's home since it was conceived in 1990, but the park got a face-lift this fall and wasn't ready for a rink in time for the holidays. (Instead, the Sacramento Downtown Partnership put up a holiday carnival there.)

The downtown partnership, which has run the holiday rink since 1995, basically lent it to the Midtown Business Association in an act of cooperation and community. Everyone figured it was a one-year move. Everyone also figured a rink was good for Sacramento, and it needed to be somewhere.

The MBA hired an outside company to set up and run the rink, but the downtown partnership still offered to let the midtowners use its skates and even its Zamboni, as a backup. When someone offers you their Zamboni, you know they're cooperating.

The midtown folks weren't sure where to put the rink. They considered the parking lot at 16th and J streets, the Memorial Auditorium lawn, the lot at 28th and J streets, 18th Street at L, even Marshall Park and Roosevelt Park. In the end, it came down to either 18th Street or where it landed, 20th between J and K.

The MBA board vote was 9-8 to even do it, executive director Rob Kerth told me. He says now

there might be one "no" vote left.

Seeing the rink, its charm and the crowds, it's hard to imagine anyone would be unhappy with it. By the end of last weekend, the MBA said, it had already topped all projections, with about 24,000 skaters and more than \$200,000 in revenue so far. (The targets were about 21,500 and \$175,000.)

Certainly, it's a hit with midtown residents.

"I only went to the K Street rink once," said Keri Christian as she skated on a recent weekday. "This is the third time this year."

Business owners nearby were equally enthused.

"We've definitely gotten a boost," said Pete Hayes, who runs Denim Spot in the MARRS. "You can feel the energy from it, and we saw a lot of walk-in traffic from people discovering us."

Kerth, naturally, would love to have the rink come back.

"Midtown is a darling spot," he said. "It's been wonderful for midtown and, really, for all of Sacramento. It's something that's family oriented, affordable and so out of the ordinary. It's like a mini-vacation right in town."

Here's where we get some irony. Kerth, a former Sacramento city councilman, was the guy who started the ice rink at Seventh and K in 1990, back before he got elected. It's named after his grandfather – it's the William J. Kerth Memorial Ice Rink – who built the Iceland Skating Rink on Del Paso Boulevard in 1940.

Kerth's father designed rinks all over the world and was director of skating events at the 1960 Squaw Valley Olympics. The son comes from an ice rink family. Still, he says a deal's a deal and downtown gets first rights.

"We always approached the rink as belonging to the Downtown Partnership," he said.

Partnership leaders know the value of the rink to midtown. They also know its value at Seventh and K.

"Their merchants like having it," executive director Michael Ault told me. "We completely understand, but our merchants need it, too."

For some perspective, remember the downtown group has paid for the rink for well over a decade, and has been a strong partner in the central city, pushing events like the Friday summer concerts, the farmers markets, the holiday lighting festival, and, through today, Dine Downtown. It's not like these people haven't been trying.

Some of those improvements at St. Rose of Lima Park were made specifically to handle an ice rink there. The partnership is finalizing sponsorships for the 2010 rink. Stores and eateries nearby look forward to having it back.

"It's a pretty important marketing event for us," Ault said.

If you're Ault and the partnership, of course you want the rink back, particularly since the blocks around Seventh and K are not downtown's healthiest. If you're Kerth and the midtown businesses, of course you want the rink again on 20th, precisely because it's a bustling spot.

Welcome to the complications of growing, evolving cities. Do you support successful areas and hope their success will spread? Or do you give resources to struggling spots in hopes of reviving them?

It's no news flash to say this town isn't big enough for two holiday rinks. Me, if I had a vote, I'd keep it in midtown, because the atmosphere – and that magic – are nearly impossible to

duplicate, and cities thrive on magic.

But cities are also social contracts. We give up a lot and get a lot to live in them, and we all share in the failures, and the successes, of the region. So, probably, downtown needs the rink more.

And the midtown people have other ideas bouncing around.

"Who knows," Kerth said, "maybe we'll set up a snowboarding hill."

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