

downtown voices

» About us

A conversation with Sarah Harris,
a Walking Minneapolis board member

Energetic, passionate about her newest project, and temporarily overextended, Sarah Harris, 41, is attempting to get people onto the streets. The vision is called Walking Minneapolis.

A principal at Eberhardt Advisory, LLC, the strategic real estate adviser, with offices in the Young-Quinlan Building on Nicollet Mall, Harris is motivated in part by the success of her father — Ray Harris, the Don Quixote of urban development, best known for developing the Uptown shopping center Calhoun Square.

Vice-chair of the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts, a member of the Federal Reserve Bank Advisory Council on Small Business, and a member of the Minneapolis Downtown Council and the Nicollet Mall Advisory Board, Harris is trying to do the impossible in making this city walkable for everyone.

The goal is to create a series of connected sidewalks that are navigable and identifiable. The scenario calls for audio and visual cues that will help pedestrians know where they are going and what they're likely to engage, walking the un-mean streets of the city.



Terry Thompson

Here are highlights of the interview with Harris.

You're married to a man who is 7 feet tall. Who is he?

He's Dave Holmgren, a former Gopher basketball center, who helps with our children, or I would never be able to do the things I do. We have three under 7, two girls and a boy.

Now you've complicated your life with Walking Minneapolis.

Minneapolisians should hit the streets. We're suggesting major loops that will feature way-finding portals with interactive computer screens that reveal city events and history. There will be vendors selling food and drink. We want to teach past and future in the best sense and enliven Downtown.

Isn't it too cold here to get**people walking outside?**

The experts we've consulted from Copenhagen and Toronto say no. There are many good days in this town and about 20 frigid ones. Skyways perform a vital function. But in certain ways they can limit street life. Walking Minneapolis is designed for exploration, good health and discovery.

You want people on the streets. Downtown retail is hurting so people don't have a lot of stores to walk to.

That doesn't have to be permanent. Besides, this is about more than retail. Consolidation of retail properties has hurt in the near-term. Retail malls are strong, and skyways have always affected the street experience. But we can get walkers and gawkers on the streets if we give some cues and make the environment more exciting.

Is anyone else helping?

Blue Cross and Blue Shield has been very active. Public and private groups are on board. The Minneapolis Downtown Council has hired a retail recruitment director to attract new business to the Mall



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Sarah Harris

and other streets. Her name is Ann Wimmer, recently of Nordstrom, and she knows her stuff.

But it's hard and gray on the streets.

It doesn't have to be that way. We can green Downtown with pocket parks that have built-in eco systems. Nooks and crannies are right for flowers and bushes. We can soften the look and feel without breaking the bank.

What kind of money are we talking about?

Not as much as you think. Walking Minneapolis is about motivating people, changing attitudes and behaviors, and revitalizing street

life and the retail that complements it. It can definitely be done. It's not about costly investment in infrastructure.

Will this take a long time to accomplish?

Well, we aren't in the business of cutting a ribbon and saying go to it. It's a long-term proposition, years not months. Too much hasn't been done, and it will take time to make a difference. If we do it right, the changes will be incremental but effective in getting people outside. Don't look for instant changes. This is too big an idea to rush.

Haven't we tried picking up Downtown before only to fail?

New buildings and new stores aren't the permanent solution. The fix is people immersed in Downtown life.

For more information on Walking Minneapolis, go to www.walkingminneapolis.org.

Terry Thompson is a writer and teacher who lives in Loring Park. He'll be spotlighting Downtown personalities for his "About us" column.