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SASKATOON, SASKATCHEWAN

# The StarPhoenix

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## DEVELOPMENT

### Well-known Saskatoon developer talks future, past of city

CHARLES HAMILTON  
THE STARPHOENIX

Over the last 50 years, Ken Achs has watched his city grow from a sleepy prairie town where it was hard to find a minimum wage job, to a booming economic hub of Western Canada. Achs got

his start in the automotive business, but since then has emerged as one of the city's most powerful property developers.

The StarPhoenix sat down with Achs to talk about how he's seen Saskatoon change over the last 50 years.

**Q:** Did you think you would be here 50 years ago when

you started?

**A:** I can't even believe that, 50 years. None of this was planned. The first year I went in business I made 6,000 bucks. I was the happiest camper in town because I liked what I was doing. We started off selling car parts and we couldn't make any money in that. We started

doing paint and body-work to help pay the bills and things were still tight. We went into the muffler business. We were doing it



Ken  
Achs

all to stay alive.

Everything ended up coming together in the late '60s and early '70s. Inflation took off. We had bought some buildings because they were cheap at the time.

We built our muffler shop out on Eighth Street. The guy that we hired to build

it was such a screw-up that I fired him and decided to build the thing ourselves. We built it in 30 days. We just kept doing that.

**Q:** How have you seen this city change over those years?

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# Achs Kept coming back with ideas

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**A:** Back then the city was 65,000 people. It was like watching grass grow. The whole psyche was that's how it is. But I would go visit friends when I was racing, going to Alberta, California. I was like, 'Wow.' Alberta was like California. Everybody was doing everything. There was money available ... It was just a whole different mindset coming from other places. So I just kept coming back with that inspiration if you want to call it that.

**Q:** You obviously have an attachment to the city. You've been involved in restoring some historic buildings like the KG or the CP Station on Idylwyld. What makes those projects attractive?

**A:** It's not really planned. You have to remember that my background is autobody work. It's hands-on kind of stuff. So when I see these

kinds of buildings that are tired, I don't fear them as being an endless money pit, because I know I can fix them.

**Q:** What about the King George building on Second Avenue specifically?

**A:** I was glad we did it, but I will never do it again. We lost a few million dollars on that project because it just took on a life of its own. It was too big. Small little restorations are neat, but things like that are cost prohibitive.

**Q:** Probably the highest profile undeveloped property you have right now, is 22nd Street and Second Avenue. Why did you tear that McDonald's building down?

**A:** I don't have any plans right now. I was just frustrated with the lack of fixing the problem downtown, with the vagrants and all the things that are going on there. I looked at it this



LIAM RICHARDS/The StarPhoenix

Ken Achs says he's glad he did the restoration of the King George building but he does not want to take on a project of that size again because it took on a life of its own.

way, I could leave it alone and put my head in the sand or I could do something. I would always have to knock that building down. So the choice was sooner or later. I said let's deal with it now. Let's knock the building down.

**Q:** What are you going to build there?

**A:** I honestly don't know what we are going to do but whatever we do we will come up with something that is unique and worthy of that corner. The biggest thing downtown is parking. So if you would ask me to guess what I would do, I would make a really pretty main floor for somebody. I would add three or four floors of parking. Then I would put something on top.

**Q:** Where do you see Saskatoon's downtown in the next 20 years?

**A:** The north downtown is a pretty exciting hunk of dirt. The city will move out of there. That will really change the complexion of the city ... (Downtown) will be fine. We have Midtown Plaza here. It was way ahead of its time, but big boxes and urban sprawl has taken away from it ... There will be other places coming downtown. It's going to be spread out more. It's not going to be like New York City where they keep piling building on building on building.



GREG PENDER/The StarPhoenix

Costs get prohibitive in major projects like the King George restoration, according to developer Ken Achs, who says he lost a few million dollars on the project.



DEREK MORTENSEN/The StarPhoenix

Demolishing the former McDonald's on the corner of 22nd Street and Second Avenue was something that had to be done sooner or later, developer Ken Achs says.