“Downtown has a very healthy and growing vibe. Folks are just happy to be downtown,” a local restaurant owner told LNP’s Tim Mekoel for a Sunday LNP story.

“We have a nice balance of restaurants, retail, galleries and cultural institutions,” added a downtown promotion official.

The story primarily concerned the explosion of downtown restaurants — there are an extraordinary 84 now with 10 more coming.

But those quotations also might have referred to the increasing number of downtown theaters — at least five live stages and a movie theater will expand to at least eight live stages and two movie theaters in the near future — or art galleries — there are dozens now with more on the way — or multiples of other entertainment venues.

It’s hardly news that Lancaster city has become one of the nation’s most vital small cities.

More people are seeking to live downtown, and two large hotels are expanding to serve more and more visitors who want to experience this place.

There was little reason at the beginning of the century to anticipate this renaissance.

Downtown restaurants were limited in number and variety. The only hotel was falling apart.

Theatrical and musical productions were staged largely in the Fulton Opera House and what is now the Ware Center. The last downtown movie theater had closed. Nightclubs were as rare as Democrats in Ronks.

Naysayers were working overtime to undercut plans for a convention center.

The downtown shut down at 5 p.m. If you saw anyone walking the streets after dark, they probably were up to no good.

When city government in 2001 unveiled a slogan — “Centuries of Fun in Just a Day” — this column commented that “a more inappropriate slogan for Lancaster would hardly be possible.”

Fun? Go to New York.

Go to Baltimore. Go to Harrisburg. Lancaster? Go back to sleep.

In 2003, a consultant told the city that it was “under-entertained.”

Well, no kidding. The downtown’s heart-stopping cultural addition a year later was a quilt museum.

But visionaries were at work, and a different downtown began emerging later in the decade.

“Lancaster has been busily reinventing itself as a hip, walkable and affordable place,” a Baltimore writer said in 2009, “one that’s bursting with galleries and trendy hangouts and promising more in the way of cultural attractions than scrapple and cheap polo shirts!”

In 2010, the town adopted a new slogan: “A city authentic.” Better than “Centuries of fun,” but hardly descriptive of the sea change that was happening.

The transformation of Lacklusterstown into a city with a “very healthy and growing vibe” has not been easy. But we had a model. There was an earlier Lancaster — before Park City shopping center undermined downtown retail and the revitalization bomb destroyed the second block of North Queen Street — that was healthy, and fun, too.

Richard Altick, who grew up in Lancaster in the 1920s and ’30s and taught English at Franklin & Marshall College during World War II, published a book called “Of a Place and a Time: Remembering Lancaster.” He described the downtown between the wars as an extremely entertaining place.

The downtown boasted the Fulton, five movie theaters and a vaudeville house, and musical performances and travelogues presented regularly at several locations.

Because of the “strict sectarians” who lived in the countryside, Altick suggested, one would have thought Lancaster would have been a kind of “moral prison house” in which to grow up.

The pursuit of happiness (fun) might have been expected to be squelched. But no.

“The wowsers, as (H.L.) Mencken called them, adopting a bit of Australian slang, may have called the tune elsewhere,” Altick observed, “but not here.”

Not then and not now.

Downtown Lancaster has come through its “wowser” period and has its “wow” back.

• Jack Brubaker, retired from the LNP staff, writes “The Scribbler” column every Wednesday. He welcomes comments and contributions at scribblerlnp@gmail.com.