

Sheraton, Museum Part of Downtown Renaissance



By Mayor Bob Coble

This month, two major events show the progress that downtown Columbia has made over the last 10 years. First, the ribbon cutting for the new Sheraton Downtown Hotel marks the restoration of the old Palmetto Building, the second-oldest skyscraper in Columbia, into a 135-room, world-class hotel built by Rick Patel and his family. Second, we will celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the Columbia Museum of Art being on Main Street. On July 18, 1998, the museum building opened in the former Macy's department store building at Main and Hampton.

The Museum brings many visitors to downtown with an attendance last year of 127,000. Exhibitions create a tremendous economic benefit to Columbia. Early next year, the museum will host the show Turner to Cezanne: Masterpieces from the Davies Collection, National Museum Wales. Some of the most successful exhibitions at the museum have been Excavating Egypt and Frank Lloyd Wright and the House Beautiful.

Columbia's downtown has seen many changes in the 10 years between the opening of the museum and the opening of the Sheraton. Main Street is part of a downtown that now includes Main Street, the Vista, the Riverfront, Innovista and soon the Bull Street neighborhood. Downtown's renaissance includes the Columbia Convention Center and Hilton Hotel, the Colonial Center, the Discovery and Horizon Buildings in Innovista, the Three Rivers Greenway, EdVenture and now the USC Baseball Stadium on the Congaree River. Gervais and Lady Streets have been transformed with restaurants and shops.

CanalSide will soon have residents, and Canal Front will be under construction this year.

Main Street has seen significant improvements over the last 10 years. Residential development is bringing people back to live. The former Tapp's building and the oldest skyscraper in Columbia, the Barringer building, have gone through adaptive reuse and been converted into apartments. Tom Pioreschi and his family have been pioneers in our residential revitalization. Main Street's office market continues to be strong. Downtown Class-A office space occupancy rose in the first half of 2008 to 90 percent. New office towers, the Meridian Building and the First Citizens Building, are complete, and now Main and Gervais is under construction. Wachovia announced in April the renovation of 1441 Main Street for its headquarters; the Marriott has been renovated; the first phase of streetscaping is complete and the second phase is under way. None of this progress would have been possible without the hard work of the City Center Partners under the leadership of Matt Kennell.

While great progress has been made, great challenges remain. We have established a retail strategy for downtown in an effort to add more stores and shops to Main Street. A Dunkin' Donuts is coming to the first block of Main. We are going to have to work hard to fill the office space left in the Palmetto Center when SCANA completes its move to Cayce.

Homelessness and parking remain major challenges. Long-term planning will be required to change Assembly Street into a link between Main Street and the Vista.

In the last 10 years, Columbia has experienced a great renaissance. All parts of our city are being revitalized. We have entered the knowledge economy with Innovista. A strong and vibrant downtown is a critical part of that revival.

Bob Coble is mayor of Columbia.

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