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Developer connects with downtown projects

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Andrew Willoughby and Anna Peeples move into their third-floor apartment in the newly-renovated America Building. / American file photo

Written by Special to the American

Residential developments are nothing new for Rob Tatum and his partners Craig Tatum, Daniel Jussely and T.J. Iarocci.

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But their latest project, Hub City Lofts in downtown Hattiesburg, is different — this is their first in Tatum’s hometown and his first involving historic preservation.

“We have a lot of experience with multi-family residential developments, mostly in Louisiana,” Tatum said. “This is our first in Hattiesburg. And although T.J. has worked with historic preservation in a New Orleans project called the Rice Mill, the Lofts are my first in this area.”

Tatum traces the beginning of the Carter-Faulkner Building renovation and the Ross-America Building into studio apartments and commercial space to Easter weekend 2010.

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While visiting with family, he received a call from longtime friend Sam Sackler, who invited him to tour the Carter Building. Even though it was in disrepair, Tatum saw the potential and a chance to contribute to the downtown renewal, a public-private effort that had been ongoing for more than a decade.

“We, of course, take on development projects that we believe are financially viable. But this one had extra appeal for me, a chance to restore two signature buildings with historic and cultural significance and contribute to downtown growth,” Tatum said.

Tatum said he was excited about the development, both for its business opportunities and his personal connection with it. His family has had a long history with Hattiesburg, and downtown in particular. His great-great-grandfather was mayor of Hattiesburg; Saphie’s Jewelry Store, the storefront of which once was in the Carter Building, had connections with his family; and during renovation of the Carter Building they found lumber stamped with the name of one of his family’s first businesses in the area, Tatum Lumber Company.

“The discovery of those pieces of lumber symbolized for me how much our family’s history is interwoven with the history of these buildings,” Tatum said.

He acknowledged, though, that the renovation process has been long and difficult. In addition to the usual obstacles that come with bringing century-old buildings up to modern standards while preserving their history and culture, the project suffered a serious setback earlier this summer when vandals caused major flooding in the America Building. A number of completed units had to be refurbished, pushing the opening of the building back a couple months.

Still, the setback didn’t diminish the partners’ enthusiasm for the project, nor Tatum’s faith in the viability of downtown as a living space.

“Regardless of what happened, I still believe downtown is a safe and positive place for people to live and for businesses to thrive,” he said.

As the project moves toward final completion, what would constitute success for the Lofts for Tatum and his partners?

“Achieving full tenant capacity in time would be a major mark of success,” Tatum said. “Seeing even more residential and commercial development in downtown as a result of people living in the Lofts is what we ultimately hope is our legacy.”



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