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Downtown Hattiesburg leaders: Lofts project will stimulate growth

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The America Building is part of the Hub City Lofts project in downtown Hattiesburg. The building offers residential and retail space. / Ryan Moore/Hattiesburg American

Written by Special to the American

Tom White and his father, Joe White, are big fans of downtown Hattiesburg — they've opened not one but two restaurants on Front Street.

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Their first, 206 Front, opened 11 years ago amid a renewed effort by government and community leaders to restore downtown to new prominence after decades of dormancy.

Now, Tom White, president of the Historic Hattiesburg Downtown Association, is observing the latest highlight in the area's renewal — the opening of Hub City Lofts with living space for more than 50 new residents.

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"It's very exciting and represents an opportunity for everyone doing business in downtown," White said. "This is why my father and I came here 11 years ago."

White echoes other community leaders, who view the development to transform the America and Carter buildings into apartment spaces as a pivotal step for downtown development.

"The economic revitalization of downtown began mainly with restaurants and eateries — they've been the glue," said Pattie Brantley, director of Urban Development and Planning for the City of Hattiesburg. "But they've been successful because they could depend on customers who worked in the downtown area. Other types of retail needed more."

Brantley says the increase of residents, both from previous developments and potentially from the Lofts, provides a larger population who need services above and beyond what currently exists.

"This will give business visionaries a much higher level of confidence to invest in ventures to meet the needs of these new residents," she said.

The expected increase in the residential population brings the area closer to what Betsy Rowell, HHDA executive director, calls "a 24-hour downtown" that will expand new business opportunities.

"As more people come to live here, it increases downtown's vibrancy; new businesses and jobs will emerge," Rowell said. "We're already beginning to see this, such as a new concierge-type service that recently opened."

White also believes the major investment that developer Rob Tatum and his partners made with the Lofts will give others the confidence to develop other areas of downtown, both involving renovation and new construction.

"There are a number of places ripe for development, like the old warehouse area to the east," White said. "There's risk in any business endeavor, but as others see the success of this and other projects, it will inspire more development."

According to Brantley, it's these incremental steps that open the door for more economic growth. Large projects, like the Lofts, breed similar projects, both large and small.

"It's similar to what came about with the Train Depot project," said Brantley, referring to the public-private partnership that transformed the Hattiesburg Train Depot into both a transportation hub and community center. "As soon as that project got underway, you immediately saw other development take off."

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