

# Down on Main Street ...

*... Things Are Looking Up*

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backhoes and bulldozers hardly form a part of the normal scenes along Main Street in Columbia. Ravaging the 1300 block under warming April skies, the big yellow machinery seems out of place, like a suit from the corporate office of a general contractor donning a hardhat to inspect a job site.



The first phase of a Main Street beautification project began in mid-March on the 1300 block.

Likewise, when the professional classes working in the bank and office buildings lining Main Street take their smoke breaks, lunch breaks and walking breaks, they're probably more accustomed to hearing pigeons coo than construction equipment rumble.

But these aren't normal times down on Main Street.



*The Barringer building is among several historic downtown structures that are being renovated to provide housing.*

After it bottomed out a generation ago like so many main streets across the nation, a years-long state of inertia set in, interrupted by only fits and stops of progress. But now that randomness has given way to big-time changes on Main Street and in the city center as a whole: A multimillion-dollar streetscaping project is taking shape. A new, state-of-the-art skyscraper < the Meridian building < is coming on line. First Citizens Bank has announced plans to build a headquarters. Residential activity is ticking upward. And plans for an arts and culture hub are coming together.

In the backdrop of those and other developments, meanwhile, things are looking up in other ways. A new vibrancy is beginning to take hold on Main Street, evidenced not only in big benchmarks like a reduction in crime but also in the little things, like a spruce-up marked by swept sidewalks and planters that have spread like welcome weeds.

The safety and aesthetic improvements on Main Street are attributable in large measure to the [City Center Partnership](#), a city government entity created more than two years ago to act as the caretaker of downtown. Known as CCP, the partnership does everything from beautification efforts to lobbying for resources for large-scale infrastructure projects.

The metamorphosis unfolding on Main Street could portend a full-on return to the heady days, when years ago the street buzzed with shoppers, moviegoers and upstairs dwellers. *"I see this as inevitable - it will happen,"* Main Street residential developer [Tom Prioreschi](#) says of such a comeback.

Like many things in life though, the revitalization of Main Street is not without its sore points and shortcomings.

Heading north, dilapidated parts of Main Street need resources and attention like that being directed toward the urban core. Opinions of the streetscaping are not universally positive among merchants. Homelessness remains a political football. And to some extent the street still has the feel of rolled-up sidewalks in the evenings.

Overall, however, the criticisms are fairly muted, and things are happening to address those that aren't. If events go according to plan, within a few years Main Street once again will live up to its name, helping Columbia move a step closer to becoming a modern, cosmopolitan city.

## Building Boom

Divided into three phases, part one of the streetscaping project began in mid-March

and is slated for completion in October. It runs from Gervais to Hampton streets and is budgeted at about \$5.5 million, all of which is city money, according to Linda Moroz, a city construction administrator who's overseeing the project.

The city is drawing up plans and lining up financing for phases two < from Hampton to Laurel streets < and three, from Laurel to Elmwood Avenue. "They don't want to do anything during the Christmas season, so I don't picture it starting later this year," Moroz says of phase two.

The overhaul will be extensive, transforming Main from a street to a dirt-covered construction site and then back into a street one block at a time. The work begins underground with installation of a communications duct, in which fiber optic or other cables could be run, and refurbishing of sewer lines serving the myriad buildings along the street. Also beneath the surface, signal cables are being upgraded to accommodate new traffic lights and the storm-drain system is being realigned for new curb lines.

Besides new traffic signals and curbs, the above-ground features include new street lights, planter areas, brick sidewalks, benches, trash cans, additional trees and a center median raised about 3 inches.

The median has been one of the sticking points in the streetscaping. For years, delivery trucks have used the middle of Main as a loading zone. But that will no longer be allowed once the overhaul is completed, according to city parking director John Spade. "It's a safety issue," Spade says.

Instead, delivery trucks will have to use what's known as a parking "lay-by." Each block will have one.

Andrew Zalkin, owner of the Army Navy Store, which has operated at 1621 Main St. since 1982, says the lay-bys have restricted hours, can't accommodate 18-wheelers and are otherwise ineffective. While Zalkin describes the streetscaping design as beautiful, he says it caters to the interests of the "upper-story people." "There's a



The old Fox Theatre at 1607 Main St. eventually could be the new home of the Nickelodeon Theatre.

totally different mindset of the banks and the lawyers and the office people as there is for the retailers," he says.



The new Meridian building at 1320 Main St. in Columbia

Although phase one of the streetscaping begins at Gervais and heads north, the city started the project on the block between Lady and Washington streets to make way for the Meridian building, which only now is becoming fully operational.

Holder Properties of Atlanta built the 17-story, \$62 million structure, the first new skyscraper in Columbia in some 10 years. At 1320 Main St., Meridian features a 1,000-space parking deck, but its amenities go way beyond that to include high-tech gadgetry like touch screens and, in the elevators, cable TV news. "It's going to be the Lexus of office space in Columbia," City Center Partnership director Matt Kennell says.

The big-dog law firm Nelson, Mullins, Riley & Scarborough is just about moved into Meridian and will be the building's anchor tenant.

In front of the building on the bright spring morning of March 26, Kennell joined city officials and downtown business representatives in a groundbreaking ceremony for the streetscaping. "As you can see the ground is already broken and well under way," Mayor Bob Coble said, couching the project as part of a renaissance in Columbia. "We know the end product will be one that'll strengthen our economy."

Along those lines, First Citizens executives announced on April 26 that the bank will build a \$40 million, nine-story headquarters on the 1200 block of Main. With a limestone exterior, the building will have 170,000 square feet housing 350 employees, according to a news release. Construction will begin late this year and take about 15 months.



CCP director Matt Kennell, beside the Meridian building

Plans for the Capitol café, which closed in 2002 after First Citizens bought the Brennan Building that was home to the storied eatery, have not been finalized, but the bank is "committed to 'respecting the historic integrity of the restaurant,'" the release says.

Meanwhile, just a couple miles down from all the action of Meridian, First Citizens and the streetscaping, much of North Main Street slogs along in need of its own facelift. But an upgrade there seems destined to happen as well.

Already, plans are being drafted and the city is acquiring rights of way for a North Main streetscaping. "It'll be beautiful, it'll make a statement," says Derek Piper, a project manager with the Columbia office of Parsons Brinckerhoff, an international engineering firm.

Stretching 2.8 miles from Elmwood to Fairfield Road, the North Main project will cost about \$33 million and be done in four phases, Piper says, adding that about half the money, or \$17 million to \$18 million, is in the pipeline. Of that, \$10 million comes from federal and state gasoline taxes, \$4 million is city bond money and another \$3 million to \$4 million is city water and sewer funding, Piper says. "That's one of the issues we're dealing with," he says of the other half of the funding, which the city hasn't nailed down.

Nevertheless, Piper says he hopes the work can start at the beginning of 2005, depending on how the rights-of-way acquisitions go. The improvements will include burying utility lines and putting in new light poles, traffic signals, crosswalks and sidewalks as well as resurfacing the road, he says.

City Councilman Sam Davis, who represents the North Main corridor, says he plans to seek additional federal and state dollars to extend the beautification from Fairfield to Interstate 20. "If we leave it as it is then the job will be half done," Davis says. North Main needs more restaurants, retail outlets and professional offices, he says. "We have a few but we just need to make the area more attractive to them," the councilman says. "The client base is there."

## Down Sloping

Conjuring images of grainy black and white photos, once upon a time Main Street was the heartbeat of the city. But that wasn't the case just in Columbia. There's a reason the concept of Main Street is fixed in the collective cultural conscience of America.

A brief essay on the web site of the National Main Street Center, a project by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to help revitalize main streets, puts it this way: "Not only was Main Street the center of the community's commercial life, it was also an important part of its social life; people thronged the streets on Saturday nights to meet friends, see a movie and window shop."



The nonprofit Renaissance Foundation wants to renovate Bethel AME Church at Taylor and Sumter streets into a community arts and culture center.

Things started to go down hill in the 1970s. The forces of white flight, suburbanization and sprawl converged with the malling of America to slowly suck the life out of Main Street. "Throughout the nation, in town after town, the story repeated itself," the essay says. "Downtown businesses closed or moved to the mall, shoppers dwindled, property values and sales tax revenues dropped."

When the decline finally bottomed out in the late '80s, vacant storefronts and empty, trash-strewn streets had become the new aesthetic of Main Street. In the ensuing years, the National Main Street Center write-up says, "People forgot how important their downtown and its historic commercial buildings were in reflecting their community's unique heritage."

Thomasena Reynolds, the 60-year-old proprietor of His & Hers Tailoring, remembers it all well. "It was exciting," Reynolds says of the years before Main Street crashed. "There was a lot happening."

Reynolds opened His & Hers in 1972 in a hodgepodge of small businesses < a cobbler, a bakery, a Christian Science reading room < at 1332 Main St. called Arcade Mall. In 1985 she relocated her tailoring enterprise to Main and Lady streets, then returned to the mall in 2003. "So we just moved back home," she says.

Between serving a steady flow of customers on a mid-April morning, Reynolds recalls large department stores like Belk and Macy's abandoning Main Street in favor of suburban malls. "When those stores started moving out then it started going down because people didn't have a reason to come downtown anymore," she says.

For her part, Reynolds equates the streetscaping to renovating a house, saying it's expensive and time consuming but worth it in the end. Besides, she says, "It was going to happen whether we go along with it or not, because change happens and life is about change. No sense in fighting it or trying to find fault with it."

Even in the down years of the '80s and '90s though, reports of the death of Main Street were at least somewhat exaggerated. After all, manic as it was, the street did maintain a half-life of daytime activity, what with a captive audience of office worker throngs frequenting cafeterias, banks and other select businesses.

Still the throngs were always gone after 6 p.m. From high up in the Palmetto building, the Bank of America tower or another, gazing upon the roads crossing the Congaree River was to bear witness around that time every weekday to the ghostly, emptying effects of the evening commute.

That part of story still holds true. But inasmuch as history runs in cycles, Main Street is coming back from the half-dead and taking on new life.

## The Turnaround



The former Republic Bank building at 1208 Washington St. might serve as Workshop Theatre's new home.

Arguably the comeback started in 1998 when City Council relocated the Columbia Museum of Art from Bull and Senate streets to Main and Hampton streets. The move created an anchor for an arts and culture hub that developer **Prioreschi** and other Main Street advocates are pushing vigorously.

Coinciding with the museum showing up, **Prioreschi** showed up and started buying up buildings to remodel into residential investment properties under the name Capitol Places. A New Jersey native not prone to shine people on, he describes the reaction to his plans thusly: "Everybody thought I was nuts."

Helped by interest-free loans from the city, **Prioreschi's** properties include the 31-unit Kress Apartments above Rising High at 1502 Main St.; 20 apartments in the old Berry's building at Main and Taylor streets; 10 condos under construction in the former Silver's building on Main; and 75 apartments planned for the Barringer building, also on Main.

Save one or two units in turnover, **Prioreschi** says his properties have stayed full, a fact that he says validates downtown as a viable housing market. Prioreschi is passionate about the issue, stressing housing as one of two components necessary for a vibrant downtown with a quality of life that attracts residents as well as visitors.

City Center Partnership director Kennell agrees and says the benchmark is a "critical mass" of 1,000 residents. To this point downtown housing isn't where it needs to be, Kennell says. But, he says, "It's revving up."

Prioreschi and Kennell also concur on the second lynchpin of a dynamic downtown < a thriving arts and culture district.

The CCP has gone so far as to draft a plan and ask for hospitality tax funding to relocate the Nickelodeon Theatre into the old Fox Theatre at 1607 Main St. and move

Workshop Theatre into the former Republic Bank building on Washington Street just off Main.

In addition, the Renaissance Foundation, a new nonprofit group, is planning to renovate the Bethel AME Church at Taylor and Sumter streets into a cultural arts center with a museum and a performance hall.

While the theatre relocations and the Bethel renovation are merely in the planning stages at this point, Kennell says all three projects could be completed within a couple years, forming a major link in an arts and culture loop running from the Koger Center to The Township Auditorium.

In any case, the revival of Main Street resumed between late 2001 and early 2002 < about four years after **Prioreschi** began investing downtown < when City Council created the City Center Partnership and crafted a mechanism to channel resources into the area. Called the Business Improvement District, or BID, it consists of the 36 blocks bounded by Gervais, Assembly and Marion streets and Elmwood Avenue.

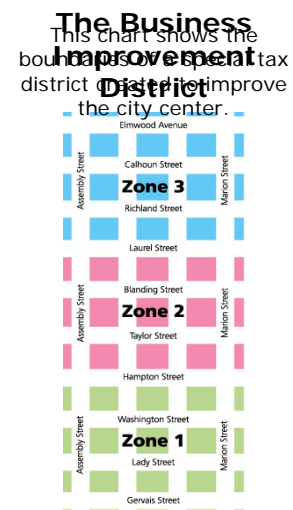
"It's a big rectangle," Kennell says of the BID, describing it as "a creature of the municipality." Property owners in the BID pay a special tax < about 16 cents per \$100 of assessed value, according to Kennell < that funds downtown improvements. "In 2006 the district is up for renewal," he says. The partnership manages the BID, and while it is not a membership entity, Kennell says most property owners in the district signed a petition supporting its creation.

With an annual budget of about \$800,000, the CCP operates out of an office at 1530 Main St. About two-thirds of the partnership's funding comes from the BID. Churches and other nonprofits in the district, City Council, Richland County Council and the federal government contribute the rest, according to Kennell.

The partnership spends about half its budget on a contract with Brantley Services. The company, based in Louisville, Ky., employs a dozen locals who make up what the CCP calls "hospitality" or "clean and safe" teams. Uniformed in blue khakis and mustard yellow shirts, team members tool around the BID by vehicle, by bike and by foot sweeping, pressure washing and otherwise keeping the place in order. "They're very visible," Kennell says.

If something nefarious is going down team members contact police. In fact, the CCP attributes an overall 24 percent crime reduction in the BID < between the 12 months after the teams hit the street in June 2002 and the same period a year earlier < largely to their presence. While some crimes increased < armed robberies of individuals escalated from five to 12 < the vast majority dropped, in many cases precipitously, according to Police Department figures. Examples include:

- *burglaries, down 39 percent, from 28 to 17*
- *vehicle break-ins, down 48 percent, from 103 to 54*
- *disorderly conduct, down 47 percent, from 30 to 16*



- *open container violations, down 89 percent, from 54 to six*

"Further," a CCP analysis says, "unlike the previous year, in 2002-03 there were no reported incidents of purse snatching, auto tampering, prostitution, arson [or] suspicious packages."

**Prioreschi** and Kennell know the numbers and contend that people's perceptions of Main Street have improved, but both say there's a ways to go on the image thing. "They don't know that there's housing downtown," Prioreschi says, adding, "They still have the perception that it's dirty and unsafe to come downtown."

One CCP project that could play a role in changing the public mind about Main Street is the Magnolia Market, an outdoor affair on Hampton Street featuring fresh produce, arts, crafts, food, live music and other entertainment as well as kid fun like face painting. The seasonal market operates on Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. in April, May, September and October. One also is held during the Christmas period. In the remainder of this spring the market is slated for May 8, 15, 22 and 29 before recessing until the fall.

To Kennell, things like the Magnolia Market represent a certain ambiance, a "cool factor" necessary to recapture Main Street's dynamism of yesteryear in the 21st century. "It's all about creating memories and moments maybe more so than the big silver bullet project," he says.

Street musicians and other artists also might be part of the mix.

While there is an ordinance on the city books forbidding street musicians, Mayor Bob Coble has said he would encourage City Council to consider lifting the ban. An issue monitored in these pages, the most recent inquiry found the prohibition still in place a few months ago but not enforced and street musicians no longer being kicked to the curb, or off of it.

Kennell says he's talked to city officials a few times about the matter and is "very much in favor of street entertainers," with a caveat: "My only concern is they can't be panhandlers."

In that regard, little green and white signs asking passersby not to give money to vagrants but to support "responsible service providers" remain fixed to many a utility pole along Main Street. But those seeking spare change, or "spange-ing" as the youthful ones call it, are gone, mostly < driven beyond the BID borders by the clean and safe teams.

Even still, "homeless issues" continue to vex downtown, Kennell says.

He is far from alone in that assessment. Those who feed, clothe and shelter the local homeless population say it is increasing, for reasons ranging from Columbia's central location in South Carolina to the fact that services in the city, albeit limited, are better than what most smaller municipalities in the state provide.

Only two weeks ago Cravens Ravenel, chairman of the Midlands Commission on Homelessness, told City Council that the city-supported Beth and Lou Holtz Winter Shelter on Hampton Street doesn't have a lease for next year and might not be able to secure one. Beyond that the shelter definitely won't have a lease, Ravenel said,

implored council to support a new winter shelter that also provides substance abuse counseling, job training and health care.

With opposition certain to arise regardless of the location, council must show the political courage to get behind a site, Ravenel said. "Somebody's got to stand up," he said, adding that "it is the right thing to do" and it makes "coldly practical" economic sense because the homeless clog emergency rooms.

Meanwhile, the Oliver Gospel Mission at Taylor and Assembly streets has its own problems. "They can't do what they need to do in their current location," Kennell says, describing the mission as a good neighbor.

To serve a larger population, expand its drug treatment programs and begin providing job training, the mission tried to relocate to a vacant warehouse at Barnwell and Richland streets in October. But the facility needed rezoning, and after warehouse neighbors threw a fit and City Council wilted under the pressure, the mission abandoned the plan.

In response, Coble prodded the reluctant seven-member council into passing an ordinance supporting expansion of the mission at its current location. The vote was 6-1. Expressing worry about the impact of an expansion, Councilman Davis opposed the measure.

As it follows, the fate of an expansion is anybody's guess.

What appears more certain is that after two decades of withering life, Main Street is poised to recapture the vitality of a bygone era, only with a contemporary look and feel. If bolstered by an arts and culture network, such a turnaround would be a big step toward Columbia finally coming around.