

MAIN STREET PAVING WAY FOR GROWTH

MIKE RAMSEY, Staff Writer

At lunchtime, it's crowded at the Sherlock Holmes Pub at the corner of Main and Washington streets.

When the dinner crowd is that good, Main Street will have arrived. The pub, set underneath the Palmetto Building, started serving dinner in January, prompted by the energy and business that owner Andrea Cooper sees returning to Main Street.

Cooper is now watching the progress of other projects that she and others hope will bring more people to Main Street: an apartment building and the possibility of two theaters.

"If we could get the theater and those apartments across the street, we would definitely be open on Saturday and Sunday," Cooper said.

The effort to change Main Street from busted to bustling is about as far along as the pub. There has been progress, but it's not there yet.

In an effort to reverse decades of decline, the city of Columbia has invested at least \$2 million in Main Street, mainly in loans. And the city will begin a \$12 million streetscaping project in January.

"You can't ignore your Main Street," said Hamilton Osborne, a city councilman.

While some investments have been costly and slow to develop, others have yielded immediate results in the form of new downtown residents.

And private investment on Main Street - especially the \$62 million, 17-story Meridian building on the 1300 block - is beginning to move forward.

"I think we have turned the corner on Main Street," said Tom Prioreshi, who has developed three Main Street residential projects in the past four years. "There are a lot of positive things going on. If you measure it all, the scales have now tipped to many more favorable things than negative."

Prioreshi will soon begin work on transforming the Barringer Building, Columbia's first skyscraper, into up to 80 apartments - the ones that Cooper is watching.

Those, along with the potential relocation of Workshop Theatre to the former Republic Bank building at Washington and Main, could create the final link in the chain for Main Street to get after-hours activities, Prioreshi said.

Although activity on nights and weekends is still sparse, there are signs it is growing.

Events sponsored by the Columbia Museum of Art, bands at Mac's on Main and Jammin' Java and dancing at Club Rio have energized parts of Main Street.

"I think people like to have a place where they can get dressed up and go out," said Jordan Smith, a doorman at Club Rio.

Smith said the busiest nights are Friday and Saturday.

And the City Center Partnership, an organization formed to clean, secure and market downtown, has been sponsoring a Saturday event called Magnolia Market to bring people downtown during normally slow times.

Matt Kennell, executive director of the City Center Partnership, said a lot could change quickly if Workshop Theatre makes the move. There also is an effort to move the Nickelodeon movie theater from South Main to the former Fox Theater at 1607 Main St.

Columbia City Council has been asked to contribute about \$2.5 million to the moves. Council has not decided whether it will.

Even if City Council doesn't help with the moves, the city has already placed some bets on Main Street.

In addition to the long-awaited \$12 million streetscaping, which will provide better sidewalks, lighting, seating and landscaping, Columbia has loaned developers millions of dollars for residential development.

Prioreschi, who redeveloped the Kress Building, Berry's on Main and Silver's five and dime store into three housing projects, has received a loan of more than \$1.2 million to build apartments.

Regular banks aren't ready to bite on the downtown housing market, he said.

"I couldn't have done a single thing without the help of the city."

Prioreschi said his apartments are nearly all rented and he is repaying his loan.

His projects have added 61 residences along Main Street already.

But it has taken longer to see success at the Tapp's Department Store building. The Tapp's building housed a popular restaurant and busy store until it closed in 1995.

Columbia loaned Mainstream Development Group \$880,000 to redevelop the former department store into 42 high-end loft apartments. The city also purchased and demolished the building adjacent to Tapp's so that windows could be cut in the side of building.

Since the apartments opened last September, only 26 of the 42 have been rented, said Jim Gambrell, Columbia's economic development director.

"They've been working real hard to lease that building," said Gambrell, who said the leasing has picked up steam.

The developer has repaid the loan, according to city records.

But as part of the deal, Columbia had to agree to lease the bottom two floors at a cost of \$300,000 annually for 10 years.

Two months ago, the city sublet the ground level to Carolina Interiors Market, an antique and furniture store, for \$50,000 a year. The city is still seeking tenants for the basement and is paying

the remainder of the lease payment.

Osborne said he is content with the progress at Tapp's.

"The Tapp's building has perhaps not been as successful as we had hoped, but it certainly has not been a failure," he said.

Councilman Jim Papadea said he feels much better about Main Street now than he did five years ago.

"It still has got a ways to go. I think we are making a lot of progress, I really do."