

# Publix downtown

By **JOHN C. DRAKE** and **DAWN HINSHAW**  
Staff Writers

Two years ago, Jim Dickens moved from the suburbs to Columbia's Main Street and discovered everything he needs within walking distance of his beautifully restored, one-bedroom apartment — except a grocery store.

That changes Wednesday, when a new Publix opens in a historic warehouse at Gervais and Huger streets.

“It will be nice to have that convenience,” said Dickens, who sets out after work maybe three times a week for milk, fruit and frozen dinners.

“It's down the street instead of across the river.”

Columbia taxpayers have helped create the atmosphere and convenience that's so attractive to Dickens and some 4,000 other downtown residents.

The city gave the developers a \$1.6 million subsidy to spark the grocery project and save a landmark, hoping to nurture a new neighborhood.

The opening of the Publix will be a key test of the city's conviction that private dollars follow public commitment.

It does not represent the end of public investment downtown, but it might signal a shift.

## ATTRACTING NEW RESIDENTS

Today there is a demand to live downtown.

Jennifer Carter, a residential Realtor with Carter Realty, has a waiting list of 180 people who have expressed interest in living downtown.

“Everything from graduate students to empty nesters,” she said. “A good bit were professionals who worked downtown and just wanted to be close to work.”

Dickens, a 42-year-old manager for Time Warner Telecom, took an apartment in the **Kress building** just until he could sell his house in Lexington but found himself unwilling to leave.

He likes the atmosphere — the mix of people, the restaurants, the art museum, the music on the streets and in the parks. “It's like the epicenter of my little universe.”

And he likes the changes, the contrast between landmarks and new buildings. If he could find something to buy, he said, he might settle in for good.

**In the past six years, Tom and Madeline Pioreschi have bought and renovated three Main Street buildings.** They have just embarked on their largest project, converting the city's first skyscraper, the **Barringer Building** at Main and Lady streets, into 75 apartments.

**Tom Pioreschi** said the city should counteract urban sprawl with "infill" development downtown, encouraging investors to refurbish old buildings and build new projects.

## IMPROVING DOWNTOWN

In mid-March, the city started a \$13.7 million project to repave Main Street, installing new lights and greenery and raising center medians to discourage double-parking and to provide a safe crossover for pedestrians. It eventually will run between Gervais Street and Elmwood Avenue.

Residents and downtown workers alike hope the improvements, coupled with recent news about changes in the downtown hotel scene, will attract the upscale shops missing from Main Street.

A local developer is renovating the Palmetto Building from office space to a hotel, while the Adam's Mark is converting to the more recognizable Marriott.

"We knew that if we could get a grocery store, it would be the final step in the 20-year goal of revitalizing the city center and the downtown riverfront."

Reach Drake at (803) 771-8692 or [jdrake@thestate.com](mailto:jdrake@thestate.com). Reach Hinshaw at (803) 771-8641 or [dhinshaw@thestate.com](mailto:dhinshaw@thestate.com)