Businesses remaking downtown

New buildings to go up; stores moving in

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It's "out with the old and in with the new" downtown where various buildings are being demolished to make way for future development.

One building on Main Street is giving way to a Postal Credit Union branch. Another on Main is going down for speculative development. A third demolition on Florida Street will allow St. James Episcopal Church and its day school to expand.

"I'm certainly excited about the new buildings coming into downtown," said Davis Rhorer, executive director of the Downtown Development District. "I think this is just more confidence in development downtown."

The central business district also is getting nine new merchants and restaurants on Third Street, as well as employees and visitors associated with three federal and appellate courthouse developments and the Jazz/Argosy and Casino Rouge/Carnival Cruises riverboat casinos that will open in coming weeks.

Not all new buildings and merchants entering downtown are being attracted by the riverboats, Rhorer said.

"The office of Chase Manhattan Bank in downtown because of that," said Brian Seoud, owner of City Cafe at Third and North Boulevard.

Seoud is considering extending his hours of operation beyond 6:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., but would "see what happens" after the boats open.

Seoud's restaurant is located closest to Jazz/Argosy.

"They've got their own entertainment centers down there, restaurants, vending centers. They might capture most of the crowd there," Seoud said.

If gamblers park throughout downtown, that could create some "foot traffic," and potential new customers for his restaurant, Seoud said.

The bulk of City Cafe's business is during the 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. lunch hours, and is consistent because of the workforce in the central business district.

"A place can only seat so many people. Whoever seats the most and can turnover the most can be most profitable," said Seoud, whose restaurant accommodates 160 patrons. "That's why I do deliveries. You have to do as much in those hours as you can. That's the secret to downtown business, right now.

"You can make a comfortable living, but you won't get rich. That's why it would be an advantage to have evening trading and weekend trading," Seoud said.

Cumulatively, more than $230 million in development has been completed or scheduled in the central business district during 1994, Rhorer said.

"There is already an estimated work force of 17,000 people downtown, which is home to 2,000 residents in the historic Spanish Town and Beauregard Town neighborhoods.

The riverboats, which provide the bulk of the new employment, are projected to average more than 2 million visitors annually.

The once-bustling Third Street is again developing into a "pedestrian corridor," Rhorer said. Rhorer has encouraged the DDD to schedule a Third Street Celebration between Florida and Laurel streets 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Sept. 30.

Already in business this year or opening on Third Street are five restaurants and four specialty shops: Subway Sandwiches; Steve's Pizza Parlor; Third Street Tavern & Deli; Maggio's Cafe; Rebrandt Studio; Roy Pobl's Gallery; Forget Me Not Antiques; Fenn's Formal Wear; and City Cafe III.

"The mixture is not that different from what we have downtown," Rhorer said.

"It is a combination of restaurants and specialty gallery and antique shops that tend to attract patrons downtown," he said.

"My impression is that it is working," Rhorer said.

Rhorer said the restaurant and other growth is "gradual as the market increases."

"I would rather not have 20 new businesses open up at once and have half of them close because there is not a market downtown," Rhorer said.

Seoud said his second City Cafe location will fill a void on the north end of downtown from the January closure of Angelo's restaurant. Angelo's owners said they closed rather than pay higher rent demanded at One American Place.

Seoud said his sources of business at his first location primarily are "the Clerk of Court's Office, City National Bank, Sheriff's Office, that half of town."

"He sees little walk-in business from the north end of downtown, but gets calls for deliveries to the area where One American is located."
“Obviously, people are pushed for time for lunch. Obviously, they would like to see me down there,” he said.

Seoud said he is not bothered by the other new restaurants opening on Third Street.

“I’m one of those firm believers, the more business the better for everyone,” he said.

Ideally, Seoud would like to see more retailers downtown to lure workers out of offices and attract more downtown visitors.

“This portion of Third Street is kind of like the heart of downtown,” said Brad Fenn, who chose downtown for a second Fenn Formal Wear location.

Fenn has operated a store on South Sherwood Forest for nearly two years. Fenn wanted a second location to house a store and a warehouse distribution center, he said.

Fenn’s rents tuxedos and formal wear at its stores and feeds rentals from its downtown distribution center to owners of other stores in towns surrounding Baton Rouge.

“Our primary concern was the warehouse” in selecting downtown, over suburban warehouse areas, Fenn said. “It was good traffic for a second store, plus, to be honest, rent is cheap,” he said.

The downtown rental store has been open less than two weeks, so it hasn’t established a track record, Fenn said.

With a substantial number of law firms and business people located downtown, “we’re expecting to do a good Christmas business and good Mardi Gras business,” Fenn said.

Furniture gallery owner Roy Phelps said the riverboats and government buildings are attracting attention downtown, but he located there because of a natural affinity for the area. Phelps cited the Mississippi River as an attraction and said he considers the district to be beautiful, clean and secure.

Phelps has done interior design work for 17 years and specialized in furniture design for the past 10 years.

His New Orleans-inspired Vieux Carré collection is formed from iron work and glass. He also has created a Metamorphosis collection, refashioning furniture pieces made from the 1920s to 1960s.

Developer and property owner Hunt Hearin, who is behind one of the building demolitions on Main Street, is hopeful riverboat gambling will stir new activity.

“I believe there is a lot of opportunity on Main Street. It’s going to be the main exit for the gambling activity and we hope things are going to perk up,” Hearin said.

Hearin is demolishing a structure next to the vacant Joy’s Furniture building at 500 Main St. for paved parking.

Hearin said Joy’s Furniture, originally known as the Jackson Building, will be repaired and secured to prevent deterioration of the 1880-era building.

No specific plans are in the offering for the two-story, 20,000-square-foot building.

“I just have to find the right user,” Hearin said.

Hearin acquired the buildings in July for $225,000 from Abraham Kupperman in New Orleans, court records show.

Hearin also is converting a building nearby at 440 N. Fifth St. into mini-warehouse storage space available to downtown offices, lawyers and workers.

He is involved in renovating another 30,000-square-foot building at 525 Florida St., the site of a 6,500-square-foot Kinko’s multimedia center.

Across Florida Street, St. James Episcopal Church has demolished the former WJBO radio station building. The site was donated to the church by Douglas L. Manship, who formerly was a station owner and is president of Capital City Press, which publishes The Advocate, Sunday Advocate and SATURDAY.

“What will replace it we haven’t decided yet. It obviously will have to do with church needs and day school needs,” said Father George D. Kontos.

Across from Hearin’s former Joy’s Furniture site, buildings located at 601, 605 and 615 Main St., which formerly housed Social Security offices, are giving way to the new 5,000-square-foot Postal Credit Union branch downtown to serve federal employees. It is relocating from postal space at 717 Convention St.