Catfish Town two years old

‘Festival marketplace’ quieter but continuing

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There’s a party on the levee and it’s called Catfish Town. Where has the party gone? a merchant asks.

It’s a place that Baton Rougeans bring their out-of-town guests, but they don’t shop here themselves, says another shop owner.

Eight local individuals have made a serious financial and emotional commitment to Catfish Town. We’ve invested $30 million—more money than any group has ever expended in the Central Business District in the history of Baton Rouge, says managing partner Jerry Dodson.

It’s been nothing but a plus for the city and the people of Baton Rouge, says Mayor Pat Screen, citing the sales tax revenues garnered through no expenditure of local monies.

Is Catfish Town—approaching its second anniversary this Friday—still a viable “festival marketplace” and what exactly does that phrase mean?

As the mayor says: “It all depends upon your perspective.”

Its merchants and managers remain optimistic.

On July 4, 1984, Catfish Town opened its numerous doors to an estimated quarter-million revelers who sampled the varied cuisines of the Food Court and drifted shoulder-to-shoulder through a string of small shops offering antiques, clothes, gift items and other sundries.

First anniversary crowds were estimated at a considerably smaller 100,000, and the managers this year hope for a similar number of visitors to partake of the entertainment, retail promotions and evening view of levee fireworks.

While the crowd estimates have dwindled, so, too, has the amount of leased retail and restaurant space in Catfish Town. The developed property encompasses 175,000 square feet, including non-leaseable space such as elevators, stairwells and closets, Dodson said.

Of the 139,000 square feet considered net space, 66 percent is under lease now, Dodson said. At the time of its opening, 65 percent of the available space was leased, but not all of those 139,000 square feet were completed and leaseable, and a waiting list contained names of those anxious to join in the “party on the levee.”

In fact, Cafe Beaurgard, a sizable tenant owned by partner Paul Due shut its doors last Monday, leaving behind an unexpired lease, according to onsite manager Dwana Folse.

The declining number of leased square footage has led to the questioning of Catfish Town’s viability.

Most of those with continuing involvement with the project have a two-word answer, spoken with the gravity of an upper case disease—“The Economy.”

While general economic conditions may be the pervasive and primary cause of difficulties at the marketplace, more than one secondary cause comes up in conversations with merchants and managers.

“We began with the theme ‘Fun on the Levee.’ As time has progressed, we have seen that that may not have been the best theme for a retail and restaurant center,” Dodson said. “... We think we’ve blended together the entertainment and merchandising aspects after learning how to handle a festival...”
Jerry Dodson

Most merchants interviewed said the tourists do the shopping, and the natives come for the entertainment and bring their out-of-town guests to do a little of both.

The historic emphasis placed on Catfish Town concept also has led to a problem in that the layout offers no contiguous space large enough to house an anchor, or large-draw merchant such as a department or drug store, that subsequently would attract other large- and medium-scale merchants.

The Beauregard Building cannot be gutted, for instance, to provide enough room for a major anchor because such a move could endanger the historic status of the project, Fiske said. Federal guidelines for historic status require that a building maintain the integrity of its original structure.

"On weekend afternoons, we benefit from being in Catfish Town. The rest of the time I've been fortunate enough to stand on my own," said Gerry Poch, owner of Mamachic's Mexican restaurant which opened last November.

For a year before opening his own establishment, Poch was manager of Catfish Town and worked for the Dodson law firm when the project was in its development stages. He nonetheless voiced the same optimism as other merchants for Catfish Town and for his own business.

"I really believe Catfish Town is good for Baton Rouge and will be in the long run. I don't know what will happen in the short run," he said.

As for the continuing decline in rental space, Poch said, "I don't think it's the lack of expertise in selling space, it's just the economy.

... I think the two factors are the bad economy and people are more scared to do anything because they're afraid it's going to get worse, ... We're seeing the natural attrition without the natural re-testing that would occur in a robust economy."

Poch said Catfish Town was marketed extremely well as a tourist stop by the way of the "World's Fair," but the tourist image still may be returning home to hometown folks. He also is surprised at the lack of patronage by the LSU community because of the geographic proximity of the two areas.

Poch said his seven-month-old establishment is doing better than projected, particularly at night. He believes the secret to his own success - and that of Catfish Town - will prove to be staying power.

"You have to have a market for what you want, whether it's shirt or jewelry."

Amy Smith, who became a first-time business owner in February when she bought the jewelry and gift shop Sylvia's on the Riverfront, said she can't complain.

"I think a lot of people compare the volume of business they did during the first year with what they're doing now," Smith said of fellow merchants.

"There's not that much volume, but it's still a good business."

Arturo Moncada, owner of Arthur's Jewelry, described his business as "fantastic." But, he explained, he derives the bulk of his on-premises income from watch and jewelry repair stops that come from major jewelry stores around Baton Rouge.

As a sideline of sorts, Moncada also sells silver and gold jewelry by weight.

"If business is bad, I can just lock my doors and keep working," he said.

Moncada took over the locations Jan. 1 from a jewelry dealer who also shut the doors of another location. He said he plans to repair his lease July 1.

A surprising phenomenon for management has been the expansion of merchant space into second ventures.

"We've done well in the Food Court, so we decided to expand into retail," Jim Jeannonne said of his family's decision.

With his son, daughter and wife, he has operated Jeannonne's Creole Kitchen since opening day, and two weeks ago, opened Sunday in the Park. The restaurant bought the inventory of a defunct sunglasses boutique in Catfish Town and also offers umbrellas, hats, tennis totes and outdoor-type "sundries."

"I'm real pleased with the way the public has accepted Catfish Town. ... Baton Rouge people bring their guests. I've discovered Baton Rouge has a good number of tourists running through it," Jeannonne said.

He attributed the lack of occupancy to Catfish Town's "grocery store" and says he observes a number of successful merchants.

"My only complaint is that we're a political punching bag," Jeannonne said, referring to the six-month period during which beer could not be sold in go-carts. That dry period proved to be a slump in business because the crowds attracted to the entertainment events began to dwindle.

But Jeannonne, like other merchants, plans to weather the storm.

"I wouldn't have rented this space if I wasn't optimistic."

Another family of business partners has expanded into a second venture. Joyce Sanders, a former nurse, and her two daughters operate a kitchen accessories store called La Kitchenette, and a month ago opened a gift shop next door called Accessories Boutique.

"I don't have any come back another year if I didn't like it here. I like the atmosphere," Barre De Villiers, owner of Country Station, said he and another craftsman reached a contract with custom-made oak furniture are negotiating with management to open a candy shop. His potential partner plans to move into a larger space, and the candy shop would open in the vacant space.

"I love it here. I like the people, and I'm doing fairly well, maybe because I have a small shop and I don't have a lot of money tied up in inventory," said De Villiers.

He agrees with Jeannonne, who says: "You can't stop living because the economy is bad."