Downtown was the place where residents shopped, conducted business and plied their trades. Over time, citizens migrated to the suburbs and downtown districts struggled to survive. Once a thriving resource on the Mississippi River, decades of decline took its toll on Downtown Baton Rouge.

What a difference time makes. Today, after more than a decade of planning, downtown Baton Rouge is on the move again and city planners say they envision it being an area that benefits the whole community—one where its people can work, visit, recreate and just enjoy.

Through public and private financial investment, the city has been the recipient of millions of dollars in renovation and new construction over a 10-year period. Governmental consolidation in the area continues, with figures indicating more than 0.1 million square feet of new office space, two parking garages and extensive renovation of existing space upon completion of the building program.

Statistics supplied by the Downtown Development District note that some 22,000 people count downtown as permanent places of business. An additional 100,000 pass through daily to conduct business, and an approximate 2,000 people live in the area. Some 40,000 students at LSU and Southern University also have easy access to downtown.

According to Davis Rhorer, executive director of the Downtown Development District, the improvements are part of a mission that creates a partnership between both the city and the state, while benefiting all its citizens.

The Downtown Development District was created in the fall of 1987 to address long term plans and goals, as part of a master plan that is now in the "tweaking" stages, he explained.

All the downtown improvements, new additions and entertainment avenues are designed to create an atmosphere that merges the vitality of its economics with a rich, historic past that makes the city unique, he said.

"What it does for the city is put more people downtown on nights and weekends as well," he said. "This summer we will be breaking ground on a new planetarium space theater near the LASC (Louisiana Arts and Science Center). That will bring an educational dimension that is also entertaining with the potential of movies in the evening."

A hotel, currently under construction and projected to open in December, offers a 200-room home away from home for business and convention traffic the city hopes to attract in coming years, Rhorer said.

The trend across the country is redevelopment of its downtown districts, Rhorer said.

"We want ours to be one where you can walk from one thing to another, where a conventioneer or a visitor can walk everywhere you want to go and all points will be covered," he said.

Rhorer said the downtown renovations and construction is the result of an "unprecedented amount of cooperation" between city, state and private sectors, some years in the planning.

Plans for a state museum and visitors center will come to fruition next to the Pentagon Barracks downtown, as will an 18-acre park on the river. Together, all combine to "define us as downtown and a capital city," Rhorer said, noting that most of the planned construction could be completed within the next two to three years.

Two historic residential neighborhoods, Spanish Town and Beauregard Town, mean that downtown isn't just for visiting. Both neighborhoods are thriving as places people call home, Rhorer added.

To add to the sense of home, there's the Red Stick Farmers' Market each Saturday year-round in the municipal parking lot at 300 North Boulevard at the intersection of St. Louis Street and North Boulevard, offering goods directly from area farmers.

An arts market is held on the first Saturday of the month adjacent to the Farmers' Market, offering arts and crafts created by local artisans.

Downtown restaurants and clubs offer a multitude of dining and entertainment possibilities. Friday night concerts attract fans of rhythm and blues to jazz to the streets near the river.

Newcomers should make downtown one of their first stops, said Leon Maisel, president of the Baton Rouge Area Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"To really orient to the city, you need to appreciate its very rich history and that can be done in a microcosm downtown."

The Louisiana State Capitol Complex state office building.

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— Davis Rhorer executive director of the DDD

The expansion of the Riverside Centrplex should be helpful in attracting convention business, while the history surrounding the seat of government and the Mississippi River contribute to a main thrust in tourism, he said.

"It's having company come in and you want to put on your best face. Downtown is like our fancy parlor, and one of the vehicles that shows us a sense of place—who we are and why it's so vital. It's what makes us so interesting."