Lennie Jorgenson looks out over downtown from Jefferson Towers

DOWNTOWN Lafayette must look to future

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Today marks the start of "Downtown Preservation Week," proclaimed by Mayor Dud Lastrapes. Advertiser staffer Donna Fontenot took the opportunity to tap newly named downtown director Lanford Jorgensen for ideas on what's in store for Lafayette's downtown.)

By DONNA FONTENOT Staff Writer

Lannie Jorgensen is not one to talk much of the good old days. In his business, the old days – namely the '50s and '60s – weren't really so good anyway, he says. He still has to reckon with what happened to downtowns '60 and 30 years ago when "good money was frequently thrown after bad" and "one slum often tore down to build another" in attempts at urban renewal, he adds.

But the newly named director of the Downtown Development Authority and Downtown Lafayette Unlimited does so with a keen eye to the future.

What's more, he's convinced Lafayette must do the same if truly wants downtown rejuvenation. Residents, retailers and shoppers cannot realistically expect their downtown to return to what it was in the '50s and '60s – shopping's focal point, Jorgensen says.

"Malls aren't going away," he comments. "But that doesn't mean we'll give up on downtown retail, or that downtown Lafayette can't be worthwhile again, either."

What is the key to success, then?

"There's really nothing magic about it," he says. "It gets down to making Lafayette's downtown what people want it to be, but at the same time, making better use of what we've got. It means getting involved."

Lafayette is no different than most cities in having previously turned its back on downtown. Central business districts nationwide have gone from "4-hour centers for entertainment, shopping, transportation and medical attention to 8-hour outlets mostly for those working and living there."

The Hub City is actually one step ahead of many cities in having started something "meaningful" toward swinging the pendulum back, Jorgensen notes.

"Meaningful" doesn't hinge on replacing suburban malls or developing more master plans for centers for entertainment, shopping, transportation and medical attention to 8-hour outlets mostly for those working and living there.

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downtown building projects, he is quick to clarify, however.

"You can go to all the places in the community and ask about the" downtown projects, he continues. "But we've come to understand you can't take the people off the Philadelphia plan, see it to downtown city, and expect real success." What is needed in a downtown is carefully thought-out attention to the individual city's demands, he says. "And each city has them."

New Orleans' French Quarter or Baton Rouge's Catahoula probably wouldn't work well if transplanted to Lafayette, he adds as an example.

Jorgensen says he, the DDA and DLU have kept Lafayetle's single biggest draw on which to base a downtown.

"But we're going to find out, with the help of the community," he claims. "And when - if we do find out, I've a feeling it'll catch on.

The DDA and DLU have done a good job over the last year and a half, laying a positive foundation for Lafayette's downtown," he says.

Building a downtown may no longer be the current thing to do, Jorgensen concludes with raised eyebrows. "But we have to make it so - not with lots of cutey gimmicks and overnight building projects, but with solid, workable planning.

The infrastructure - governmental buildings, banks and retail outlets - is here, unlike some downtowns, he points out. The immediate goal now is "getting people to understand why it must be more than an emotional issue to save downtown."

There is one thing Lafayette can do tonight to make its downtown ultimate success, Jorgensen repeats. But downtown didn't come to what it is overnight and people shouldn't expect its overnight restoration, he adds.

"We need some semi-overnight success, but more than that, we need some long-term progress," he says.

Jorgensen looks to DDA and DLU as the biggest movers in that direction, saying, "Anything that happens in any city will come out of private-public cooperation."

DDA, a City-appointed, seven-member group created by the Legislature to govern Lafayette Centre Development District, is charged with encouraging private development and coordination of public projects in that district.

The area goes far beyond Jefferson and Main Streets, reaching out to boundaries at Southwest Evangeline Thruway, West and East Simcoe, Parkside Drive, Souvenir Gate, Brashear Street and Gordon Street.

It can also serve as a special taxing district, should DDA submit proposals to the City Council for levy of a maximum 10-city mill special ad valorem tax on property within the area.

DLU is made up of a larger group of volunteers who tend to organize more immediate downtown activities. Downtown Alive!, garage sales, bike races and such.

Jorgensen likes to call both groups' jobs "half-baked and dirty," half-promotion.

Each adopted an 89-day work program last month, and plan to follow those up with one-year and three-to-five year programs. Long-range plans are to outline development opportunities for downtown businesses, local government and prospective developers.

Shorter-term goals include development of such things as a downtown theme and logo, downtown clean-up, park beautification project, downtown farmer's market, and downtown police patrol.

But the groups' first aim is to establish their credibility in the central business district and with the public at large, Jorgensen notes.

As one DDA member put it to him, the short-term plans may have "no sex to them," or no excitement.

"We're going to find some more important things happening here," Jorgensen says of inevitable plans for the future.

(possibilities include a downtown convention hotel and residential area.) "But first we need credibility and recognition."

"Total public-private cooperation is not here now, and that's no one's fault. But we have to work at it," he adds. "If shoppers perceive a parking problem downtown, or a problem of safety or whatever, (DDA, DLU and downtown retailers) have got to approach those as real.

"It doesn't matter that we might be able to point to the new parking garage or other available parking spaces and prove them wrong, or cite police statistics as a taxpayer, to let your concerns. That won't get us any more customers or downtown visitors."

In short, DDA and DLU must become the "front door of the community as far as downtown," urging people to "think with ideas and give them input, he adds.

And why should suburban residents and employees do that? "Well," says Jorgensen, "I'd tell them, quite simply, this: 'It doesn't make good sense for you, as a taxpayer, to pay for parking two in your garage, when you only drive one.' "

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