Home grown in Hub City

Much of downtown Lafayette remains locally owned

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Staff Writer

LAFAYETTE — Shoppers eager to spend their money in 1940s Lafayette didn’t flock to malls or shopping centers. They strolled downtown Lafayette.

In the 1940s, downtown Lafayette was a retail hub that played host to automobile dealerships, movie theaters, hotels, restaurants and locally owned department stores like Heymann’s and Abdalla’s, along with national chain stores like Montgomery Ward, JCPenney and Woolworth.

As in many cities during the post-World War II era, Lafayette’s downtown region suffered when residential development moved to the outskirts of the city, taking commercial interests with it, said Cathy Webre, executive director of the Downtown Development Authority and Downtown Lafayette Unlimited.

“It’s the classic thing that’s happened across the U.S. and abroad,” she said. But the past 10 years or so have seen an effort to revitalize downtown Lafayette.

In the 1980s, a federal Urban Development Action Grant Program helped with renovations to the Gordon Hotel building and Jefferson Towers, Webre said. Public and private efforts to redevelop downtown

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Assessment records show much of downtown Lafayette remains in the hands of local owners. Families with lengthy histories in Lafayette — Saloom, Abdalla, Boustany and Bilodeau — owned downtown properties.

A sample of downtown real estate sold in recent years, according to assessment records, include:

- 1026 Lafayette St., purchased in 1997 for $100,000 by Paul and Karen Delauney.
- 402 Garfield St., site of Maison Mouton Bed and Breakfast, bought in 1998 for $200,000 by Lafayette Parish Law Enforcement.
- 400 West Main St., obtained in 1992 for $575,000 by Lafayette Parish Law Enforcement.
- 123 East Main St., purchased in 1998 for $108,000 by Delauney.
- 433 Jefferson St., purchased in 1998 for $200,000 by Glenn and Tina Hebert.
- 303 Vermillion St., purchased in 1998 for $130,000 by Heberts Holding Limited Liability Corporation, officers Glenn and Tina Hebert.
- 1026 Lafayette St., bought in 1999 for $200,000 by First Baptist Church.
- 726 and 800 Lafayette St. bought in 1997 for $100,000 and $72,500 from Philip Scotola and Sadie Scotola, respectively, by the United States of America for the new federal courthouse.

Banks have long maintained a presence in downtown Lafayette and that tradition continues according to assessment records. Even area banks have their main office or a branch in the downtown area, and banks own some of the most valuable pieces of downtown Lafayette real estate, according to assessment records.

The Bank One building, formerly the Premier Bank tower at 200 Congress St., and 17 lots sold in January for $1.2 million. The top downtown sales in the recent past was the Whitney Bank building at 911 Lee St., purchased in 1987 for $3.9 million, according to assessment records.

Lafayette parish assessor L. Ellis Duplex Jr. said property values appear to be falling. He would not speculate specifically about downtown property values, but said all commercial and residential properties are scheduled for reassessment in 2000.

"The construction boom is over and bringing prices down," Duplex said. "Things have leveled off and now prices are going down."

The first step in determining assessments is to establish a market value, which is what a property would be valued at if placed on the market. The state constitution spells out assessment values for commercial and residential properties as well as for personal and improvements to real property. Millsages are determined by various taxing districts.

Duplex said. Churches are exempt from taxes and homes worth up to $75,000 are exempt from state tax.

Webre said the overall strategy for downtown redevelopment includes establishing a residential presence in the area. Several apartment developments have been developed downtown businesses, including loft apartments created by Tom Day above Teche Drugs on Jefferson Street and apartments at 600 Jefferson St. By 1997, high-profile residential development was the renovation of the Evangeline Hotel at 302 Jefferson St. for elderly housing. The building was sold in September 1994 for $1.2 million to a company called 302 Jefferson Street in New Orleans. Secretary of state incorporation records indicate that John C. Blackman is the company organizer.

Re-establishing a retail core is part of the overall downtown development strategy, Webre said. Encouraging pedestrian traffic through the Jefferson Streetscapes project, residential developments and arts-related activities are important to that effort.

"The idea is to build the retail core, it's not going to be Acadiana Mall but we can establish a retail community based on art, with galleries and restaurants," Webre said. "The perfect market niche for that kind of retailing."

Arts-related entities already have a foothold in Jefferson Street — WhooJoo Stained Glass Studio and Jefferson Street Market, along with several new or planned restaurants along Jefferson Street.

But the most high-profile downtown development was the 1994 renovation of the Evangeline Hotel at 302 Jefferson Street for elderly housing. The building was sold in September 1994 for $1.2 million to a company called 302 Jefferson Street in New Orleans. Secretary of state incorporation records indicate that John C. Blackman is the company organizer.

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