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[Sept](#)

[Oct](#)

[Nov/Dec](#)

[2013](#)

[2012](#)

[2011](#)

[2010](#)

[2009](#)



**COMES OF AGE**

**Montgomery's Must-See Venue Turns Five**

April 2014

By David Zaslawsky

Photography by Robert Fouts

A large group of lawyers from all over the country have converged in Montgomery for a conference the past seven years.

During a social gathering at the roof-top garden at Alley Station in downtown Montgomery, one lawyer said, “I had no idea Montgomery had this.” Another lawyer said, “We don’t have anything like this in Philadelphia.” Greg Allen, a shareholder in the Montgomery law firm of Beasley, Allen, Crow, Methvin, Portis & Miles, P.C., which hosts that national conference, said, “I enjoy that kind of comment, and when you have Birmingham folks coming down here to look and see what we’re doing – that will tell you something.”

What it tells you is that The Alley has become the place to go for not only conventioners and tourists, but locals as well and in particular the critical young professionals, whom local officials want so desperately to stay in Montgomery.

It’s not just Birmingham officials who have come to downtown Montgomery and see what all the fuss is about. Montgomery Mayor Todd Strange said that officials from Huntsville, Mobile, Greenville and even Pensacola, Florida, have visited The Alley in downtown Montgomery looking to develop something similar.

The Alley has helped changed perceptions of Montgomery. “What they see and what they say is, ‘this is not the Montgomery I was expecting,’ ” Strange said.



It might also help the perceptions of the Beasley Allen law firm. “It’s one of the better PR (public relations) things that we have ever done,” Allen said. “I guess folks have finally realized that we’re not just bad lawyers that sue folks. We’re also a business – we really are.” Allen and the firm’s founder and shareholder, Jere Beasley, own several buildings in The Alley and Alley Station.

It is an area brimming with

energy and what you constantly hear – vibrancy. There is such an abundance of energy and vibrancy that Strange said someone told him that he was unable to find a parking

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*Tue, 12 Jan 2016 | 8:00 AM - 9:00 AM*

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### [Business After Hours](#)

*Thu, 28 Jan 2016 | 5:00 PM - 7:00 PM*

spot near The Alley on a Tuesday night.

“It’s one of the must-sees,” Strange said. You can be certain that it is on the itinerary for prospects looking to bring a company to town; or a doctor looking to set up a practice; or any number of other people who officials are wining and dining. “It takes more than the fingers on my two hands to tell you the number of times we’ve had prospects that we would have had a nice dinner at Central (in The Alley) or somewhere else and then gone into the AlleyBAR,” Strange said.

If Strange is meeting with military officials or executives in the high-tech or cyber security fields, he frequently takes them to the AviatorBAR.

Jerry Kyser, president of Jerry Kyser Builder Inc., owns Central restaurant and the reception area above it at 129 Coosa St. He said he talked to an official of a national horseshoe tournament that Montgomery is recruiting. The official was eating at Central and Kyser made his pitch for Montgomery. He sometimes meets with physicians being recruited to Montgomery. He said he gives those prospects “my take on Montgomery, having lived here for 70 years and the fact that I have never been more enthused about Montgomery. I think the next five years in downtown is going to be twice or three times as good as these last five years.”

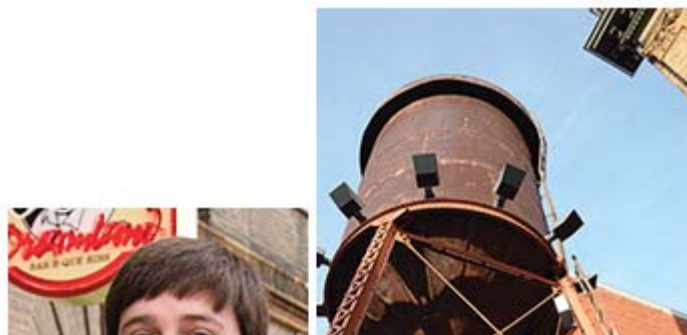
That’s right – The Alley is five years old. That’s when Dreamland Bar-B-Que opened its doors – April 9, 2009 – timed when the Montgomery Biscuits opened their 2009 season at Riverwalk Stadium, across the street from Dreamland.

Dreamland Managing Partner Bob Parker had no second thoughts about being the first retail business at The Alley. Kyser had opened the 129 Coosa St. reception area three or four months before Dreamland opened its doors.

“There was a lot of uncertainty in a lot of other people’s minds – not mine,” said Parker, who had been general manager of a Dreamland restaurant in Birmingham. “I knew what was possible at a well-run, well-located Dreamland. I had seen it.”

Although The Alley infrastructure was incomplete, Parker said it would have been “foolish” to wait another year to open. “I would rather be first than safe. You set the tone. I’m not depending on other people’s success. We are going to make or create our own success.” As a 50-year-old company, Dreamland “is not dependent on how other people do,” Parker said.

What helped provide that confidence was also across the street: the 347-room, Renaissance



Montgomery Hotel & Spa at the Convention Center. It was built by the Retirement Systems of Alabama.



“The Renaissance changed everything,” Parker said. “When I saw that they were building that hotel that’s when I decided this is where I wanted to be. How many times have you been to a big city near a convention center and there are restaurants around it?”

A handful of those restaurants are at The Alley: Dreamland, Central, Wasabi, Bistro B, Sa Za Serious Italian Food and Jalapeno’s in The Alley.

“I think (The Alley) complements Riverwalk Stadium and I think the Renaissance and convention center all blended together is what’s making it work,” Kyser said. “No one entity could make it without the other.”

The Alley has been successful despite the Great Recession and a slow economic recovery. “The biggest thing to remember is we’ve done this with the worst economic time that I’ve ever seen in business, particularly anything in speculative real estate and restaurants,” Kyser said.

While Parker was the first in The Alley (at the entrance of The Alley on Tallapoosa Street near the famous water tower landmark), Bistro B owner Tracy Bhalla is the new kid in The Alley. “The location is perfect,” she said. It certainly is. The 86-room Hampton Inn & Suites Montgomery-Downtown is a few doors down; the 237-room Embassy Suites Montgomery Hotel & Conference Center is a very, very short walk away as is Riverwalk Stadium; and the Renaissance is across the street.

Bhalla, who is from England, also owns Cool Beans on Montgomery Street, but said that even people who know about it have trouble finding it. That is not the case with Bistro B.

“Anyone who comes downtown comes to The Alley and we’re right there,” she said, referring to The Alley entrance on Commerce Street.

“You can come in, sit and have a latte or cappuccino and use the WiFi or read a newspaper,” Bhalla said. “Just come and hang out and use us as a European-style bistro.”

She plans to display her collection of English teapots and would like to partner with Renaissance on an afternoon tea.







Even with the new Bistro B, The Alley is still not complete. Kyser has space for two retail venues across from Wasabi. “We need some kind of retail and we also need arts,” Kyser said. “A combination of the two would be extremely good.” The space cannot be used for another restaurant because of offices above it.

Allen and Beasley are working on their second ballroom/reception area in The Alley at 150 Commerce St., which was originally slated to be the Children’s Museum of Alabama. Now it’s going to be a “breathtaking” ballroom/entertainment venue on the second floor, Allen said. They were not able to use the top floors and removed the floor to the third floor. The ballroom will hold about 600 people and is expected to be completed in August or September. Reservations are already being taken because Beasley and Allen’s ballroom at Alley Station is virtually booked for weekends through the end of the year. It holds about 350 people and the roof-top garden holds another 350 people.

At 129 Coosa St., Kyser can handle up to 300 people for a reception-type of event and about 150 for a seated dinner. He has space at Central for 48 seats in the River Room; 22 in the cellar and 130 seats in the restaurant’s main dining room. Now that he has Central to handle the catering for his upstairs venue, Kyser said the catering volume is akin to having a medium-volume restaurant.

Kyser estimated that when The Alley is completed, the private sector will have invested between \$40 million and \$50 million, which is double what a city official projected five years ago.

The city’s investment in infrastructure is around \$1.8 million, according to Strange. That’s a pretty nifty return on investment for the city – pump in \$1.8 million and private developers pump in \$40 million to \$50 million. That’s only a small part of the story. The city’s sales tax collections from The Alley are probably \$15 million a year, Strange said. That’s every year and more businesses will come on line.

“What we did was just find a way to make that project come to fruition and it’s a classic example of priming the pump; filling the gap; being the bridge builder between government and the private sector,” Strange said, “We had never intended to be the developer, but we always intended to be the pump primer.”

Recently a Southern California couple ate at Dreamland and left what Parker said “was a ridiculous tip.” He said they were crazy about the barbecue. “They said, ‘This doesn’t exist in Southern California.’ ”

Strange said that he envisioned The Alley being part of the entertainment district and that entertainment district would be a hub for young people. “It was fortuitous that it worked out from the standpoint of people have had good success in The Alley. As we have said so often: Success does in fact breed success.”

Kyser said that The Alley certainly makes a tremendous first impression. He said all the downtown venues “give the impression of a vibrant downtown and it’s on the move and we are out of the doldrums of yesteryear and now on the cutting edge of things that are happening in technology and what it takes to be successful in business. We offer all that.”



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