

THE NEW MONTGOMERY: Rebuilding boom: Leaders say redeveloped area experiencing an 'economic explosion'

Written by Kala Kachmar and Brad Harper
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This rendering shows the plans for the Questplex at One Dexter Plaza in downtown Montgomery. / Tim Cantey/Contributed

Many look at the baseball stadium, the restaurants, the hotels, the business buildings, the loft apartments and all the other ventures and developments that have sprung up downtown during the past decade and see a revitalized Montgomery.

Montgomery leaders look at these and see a foundation for

the city they believe Montgomery will become.

While former Mayor Bobby Bright began the process of transforming a dying downtown into a vibrant one, the area now is experiencing a period of economic explosion from the foundation built during the past decade, according to Deputy Mayor Jeff Downes.

Many people may not realize that. Chad Emerson, the city's director of development, said there are seven or eight major projects in the works that haven't been publicly announced.

"A lot more has been done than people realize because they don't always see (projects) coming up out of the ground," Emerson said. "Development is not just the construction. Construction is typically the last phase of a project."

The city has focused its efforts on buying dilapidated or historic properties and reselling the buildings or land, sometimes at less than market value, for the assurance that the properties will be redeveloped in a way that will help the area in the future.

Emerson said data-driven development has been the key to successful projects so far.

"In Montgomery, we've really adopted a strategic development focus," Emerson said. "We don't develop on a hunch or by gut feeling, but rather we generate data and see where there's demand."

Downes said the city is in the process of turning liabilities — aged facilities, run-down business corridors and tarnished “gateways” into the city — into assets.

He said “New Montgomery” means reviving hidden gems and making these parts of the city something to be proud of.

The city also has played a major role in initially “priming the pump” so private development could take off, Emerson said. Because of the interest in private development downtown that has been a direct result of the progress made so far, the city has been able to step back and offer fewer incentives for developers.

“We need to find a way to breathe new life into these areas consistent with a well-thought-out plan,” Downes said.

Some of the projects to be completed within the next few years are:

Questplex

The Questplex at One Dexter Plaza, which will house the City-County Public Library and the Children’s Museum of Alabama, is key for downtown development, Downes said.

He said the \$20 million complex, once complete, will “turn the lights back on” on Dexter Avenue, the city’s most historically prominent street. The redesigned exterior will complement the Capitol at the opposite end of the street.

Colin Coyne, the contractor hired to create the concepts for the library, also has been hired to manage the museum and library’s joint fundraising effort, which will be launched this fall. He’s currently working with architects on the library’s interior design.

Downes said the project will move quicker than originally anticipated because the state unexpectedly allocated \$2.6 million to \$4.6 million in new market tax credits for the project. The equity puts the project in a better financial situation, meaning that the Questplex could open in late 2014 or in 2015.

Downes said he also expects the same amount in federal new market tax credits, about \$1 million from grants and the sale of the old museum building, about \$5 million in fundraising and about \$5 million in debt a third-party entity will take on and pay for using rental income from the Questplex.

Maxwell East/Overlook Park

Downes said Overlook Park and what is known as Maxwell East, a five-acre parcel of land owned by the city on Maxwell Boulevard on the downtown side of Interstate 65, is an important “gateway” into the city.

“It’s the connection between the city’s two largest employers — Maxwell Air Force Base and the state of Alabama,” Downes said. “That connection itself tells those who work and live in those areas how important they are to our community.”

The city currently is negotiating the sale of that land to a developer with plans to build a mixed-use retail and apartment development that faces Maxwell Boulevard and Overlook Park across the street. Downes said if the deal goes through, construction could begin in 2013.

As soon as funding from a \$250,000 transportation enhancement grant from the Alabama Department of Transportation is released, Overlook Park will undergo renovations that will make it more aesthetically pleasing and pedestrian friendly. It will be renamed the Wright Brothers Park and include a redesigned Wright-themed pavilion and a 40-foot Wright Flyer replica.

The park could open as soon as late spring or early summer 2013, Downes said.

The grant will allow the city to go out to bid for the 1,700-foot knee wall that separates the park from Maxwell Boulevard and a staircase that will connect the Hampstead Institute Downtown Farm to the park, Emerson said.

The city recently began preparing the park for construction, which included ripping up the parking lot and removing wood from the decks.

“Gateways are important because they serve as the front door to residents and guests that come downtown,” Emerson said. “They, in a lot of ways, present the first impression.”

Madison Avenue

The city developed its Madison Avenue Gateway Plan as a guide for improving and redeveloping Madison Avenue from North Ripley to Vonora streets, a section that city officials see as another important “gateway.”

Downes said the city’s \$22 million investment in the Cramton Bowl Multiplex has kickstarted redevelopment in that part of town.

The city is in the process of purchasing the State House Inn Plaza, a dilapidated eyesore still being used as a hotel. The plan is to close on the property by Dec. 15, and implode the building so the land can be sold to developers. The preliminary work for the demolition already has begun.

Downes said the city is pricing out what renovations to the Montgomery Curb Market will cost, so the design phase can start. For years, the curb market, which is where local farmers sell produce, has been an important gathering place downtown.

The city also is in the process of acquiring the last piece of property on the north side of Madison Avenue needed for the construction of a \$4 million to \$5 million municipal court. The Montgomery County Board of Education conveyed Paterson School to the city in return for the demolition of three school board buildings over the course of two years.

Downes said the court could be under construction by late 2013.

The city still is waiting to hear from the state of the status of the old Department of Revenue building, which also will be conveyed to the city for the project.

Lower Dexter Avenue

In 2010, the city purchased 11 buildings on the historic lower Dexter Avenue for about \$3.2 million with the intent to resell them to developers at lower costs. The city put out a request for proposals and has since been working with developers on a variety of projects.

“It’s the spine of the city, and that’s why we’re focused on making it as healthy as possible,” Emerson said.

Earlier this year, the city used grants to purchase 29 Dexter Ave., a property that will be used to help create rear access to some of the other properties.

The city originally was supposed to demolish the interior of 29 Dexter Ave. this fall so developers with purchase-and-sale agreements could move forward with the due-diligence period of their contracts. But Downes said concerns about asbestos and the stability of the surrounding buildings were identified by structural engineers, slowing the process down.

Downes said the issues have been resolved, and the city should be going out to bid on the demolition by the end of the month. After the demolition, Mike Watson, president of the architecture firm 2WR and owner of the AlleyBAR and SandBAR, will be able to move forward with his plan for 28 loft apartment units, a 200-person performance hall, a bar, a fitness center and an eatery at the historic Kress Building, which is at 39 Dexter Ave.

Downes said developers who own other buildings on lower Dexter Avenue already have started discussing projects. The opening of the Irish Bred Pub restaurant at 78 Dexter Ave. in December is expected to get other developers

interested in the unsold properties that were part of the original RFP.

The Doubletree Hotel

The Madison Hotel was the toast of the town when it was built in the 1970s, and generations of Montgomerians held proms and social events there. But more recently it struggled, finally closing as the Clarion Hotel last year.

It will be reborn in January when it reopens as the Doubletree Hotel after a \$6 million project to gut and renovate the facility, while installing modern technology for the 131 rooms and 45 suites.

“We’ve got a lot to do between now and then,” general manager Tom Quatrochi said.

That includes installing distinctive features such as an 80-foot-tall mural and tiger glass, and hiring about 80 employees. The hotel will have a fitness center, a full-service restaurant and bar, and 10,000 square feet of meeting-room space to accommodate as many as 500 people.

Quatrochi said those who remember the Madison Hotel have been excited by what they’ve seen and “they can’t wait for it to be renovated and reborn.”

Emerson said city officials are excited because the hotel extends “the footprint of downtown” and could pave the way for bigger events at the nearby Renaissance Montgomery Hotel & Spa at the Convention Center.

“It increases the number of hotel rooms we have downtown, which makes us eligible to host larger conferences at the Convention Center,” Emerson said.

The hotel already is accepting reservations for March 31, 2013, and later on its website.

ASU College of Business

Business students soon will be getting an education on Commerce Street, inside a building that was once owned by AmSouth and Colonial banks.

Beasley Allen Law Firm donated the building to Alabama State University, and the school has poured \$4.2 million into renovating it to use for its master of accountancy and upper-level programs.

State Rep. John Knight, ASU’s executive vice president and chief operating officer, said work has been under way since August on phase 1 of the project — preparing the bottom three floors for use by its College of Business. Eventually, the school wants to incorporate its Center for Public Policy into the plans.

Meanwhile, the school and the city are working with Alabama Public Television to finalize a \$2.3 million sale that will allow ASU to use the former APT building beside Paterson Field to train its communications students. Knight said the student training will be a “joint effort” between the school and APT, which will remain involved.

“The whole impetus behind this is we felt for a long time that ASU should be part of the total community and the things that are happening in downtown development,” Knight said.

Emerson pointed to investments in downtown by other educational institutions, including Troy University Montgomery, which recently announced a new economic development institute that will open in spring. H. Councilll Trenholm State Technical College has a culinary lab in the former Regions building downtown.

He said those situations benefit students who enjoy learning in an urban setting while also helping energize the city.

“A key to a successful downtown is a vibrant higher education community,” Emerson said. “That’s been proven over and over in downtowns across the country.”

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OTHER PROJECTS

Here are six other projects currently in the works that could help shape the future of downtown Montgomery. Aviator Bar, 166 Commerce St. Montgomery architecture firm 2WR is building this history-of-aviation themed bar next to the Alley. It will feature hundreds of

scale model airplanes and historic paraphernalia, including a replica Wright flyer over the bar. Wright Bros. Aeroplane Co. is creating artifacts for the bar, and 2WR is doing research at Maxwell Air Force Base. It's scheduled to open Dec. 14.

Irish Bred Pub, 78 Dexter Ave. This restaurant and pub will serve lunch and dinner on all three floors and have three bars with 15 beers on tap. The menu will feature steaks, seafood, sandwiches and Irish fare, and there's an area for live music on the top floor. Owner Luis Rubio expects the facility to open in early December after spending more than \$1 million on restorations.

Old Skate Park, 301 Bibb St. Rubio's next project after the Irish Bred Pub is the former skate park site, which he plans to turn into a \$10 million apartment and restaurant development. Rubio's company bought the site for \$300,000 on May 15, with city officials praising his plan for meeting downtown's need for more retail and living space. He hopes to start construction by spring.

Former Frank Leu building, corner of Bibb and Commerce streets Birmingham developer JS Group plans to turn the former site of the Frank Leu building, now a parking lot, into an estimated \$15 million, multi-story development that will include four restaurants and 54 rental apartments. Emerson said in August that the developer hoped to open within 14 months. A similar project in Birmingham took years, but Emerson said the city has the plans for the original building so they expect no "surprises" that could slow down construction.

Printing Press Lofts, 215 N. Court St. Work started Sept. 1 to turn this 105-year-old building near Riverwalk Stadium into a 21-loft apartment structure, while paying tribute to its history as the planned site of a printing press for the Alabama Journal. Foshee Management, which manages two other renovated historic buildings in the area, expects to open the new development in June 2013. Meanwhile, the company is keeping track of the progress on its Facebook page.

Webber Building, 39 Perry St. The former Montgomery Theatre sat deteriorating under a collapsing roof in 2000

before being saved by a historic preservation push. Now, a \$3.2 million renovation will turn this 150-year-old building where the music for “Dixie” was first written down into the new home for Momma Goldberg’s Deli and Payne Lee & Associates Architects, while adding third-floor apartments. The project is expected to take about nine months.

— Brad Harper