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Argenta backers say no looking back now Downtown NLR renewal has passed 'tipping point'

BY LAURA STEVENS

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LITTLE ROCK — North Little Rock's Main Street renaissance is in full bloom, and it's not just the flowers.

The Argenta Downtown Council has planted flower beds and hung potted flowers to spruce up the area, but the big changes are for diners and shoppers.

Starving Artist Cafe will be moving across the Arkansas River from Little Rock by September to a restored space on Main Street. The new Arkansas Certified Farmers Market brings in crowds for its Tuesday and Saturday sales. And the addition of Cregeen's Irish Pub has enhanced the nightlife feel of the district, keeping it busy into the evening.

All of these additions, which have taken place within the past year or so, have contributed to something of a groundswell in bolstering the area's transformation.

Wayne Hogan, who moved his Galaxy Office Furniture & Design Center store from the River Market has seen the evolution.

"The area has changed a lot with Alltel and the ballpark and the Cregeen's Irish Pub," Hogan said, referring to the 18,000-seat Alltel Arena and Dickey-Stephens Park. "Every time they add something, it's just another increase in traffic."

Galaxy has also changed along with the city. The store, which used to sell strictly office furniture, has branched out to retro and vintage items. In September, Paddywacks vintage clothing store will move from its location at West Markham and North Van Buren streets in Little Rock to open in a section of Galaxy's building.

"As the area changed, we kind of transitioned," Hogan said.

His store also has a hot dog stand out in front on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday afternoons.

The River Rail System trolley line has tied the two downtowns together, he said.

The development of "downtown adjacent places," one of the five walkable urban types, is a definite trend, said Christopher Leinberger, a metropolitan land strategist and developer with the Brookings Institution in Washington. Cities divided by a river, such as Chattanooga, Tenn.; Cincinnati; and Kansas City, Mo.; have seen a renaissance across from the main downtown, he said.

"Rivers don't have to be a barrier anymore," Leinberger said. Areas like Argenta have more room to grow and usually utilize their historical architecture or roots to unify the area's look, he said.

At the same time, "it's important that North Little Rock not view it competitively - that a lot of the energy that is coming to North Little Rock is because downtown Little Rock is coming back," Leinberger added.

The name Argenta, which is Latin for silver, was first used in 1866 for the area because silver was once mined nearby, according to encyclopediaofarkansas.net. The town was named Argenta in 1904 but it wasn't official until 1906. It reverted back to the name North Little Rock in October 1917.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

Michael Drake, director of the nonprofit redevelopment organization Main Street Argenta, lived in west Little Rock for 20 years before he took his job in September 2003.

"The only reason I came to North Little Rock was to drive from Little Rock to another point," Drake said of his days living south of the river. "There was no reason to come here."

Downtown North Little Rock was not safe in the early 1990s, and Main Street was a one-way street, he said. But then the city moved a police station downtown, returned Main Street to two-way traffic and began streetscape improvements.

In addition, the Argenta Community Development Corp. was formed and started buying and transforming houses to stabilize the neighborhood. It also built Argenta Square, a 56-unit mixed-income apartment complex, said Brad Williams, the corporation's executive director. The corporation pushed to get Argenta named as a historic district.

"These were folks who really worked hard to change the culture and to engage the community," Williams said, as well as putting a stop to drugs, violence and crime. "Because of that, people have seen that the 'CDC' initiated, spurred a lot of the new development that is going on today."

Drake said he saw a turning point with Argenta's centennial celebration in 2004.

"In April 2004, Main Street became for four days a showcase for Arkansas of what we had to offer," Drake said.

After that, improvements kept coming, said Mayor Patrick Hays, who has held the office nearly 20 years.

Hays reeled off a number of additions to the town, private and public, including the Junction Bridge, The Enclave at the Riverfront and Argenta Place, to name a few. "I could go on and on," Hays said. The Enclave is a new 240-unit apartment building on the property where Jackson Cookie Co. used to be, while Argenta Place is mixed-use development.

Leinberger, the Brookings Institution fellow, said transforming an old rail or highway river crossing such as Junction Bridge into one for downtown pedestrians is an important step in urban connectivity for cities divided by a river. Chattanooga also took this step, he noted.

Hays said the private sector and the local government working together have made the changes possible.

"I'd say that we've enjoyed the perfect storm of beneficial progress," Hays said. "I'm not saying that there haven't been potholes that needed to be filled, but I'll certainly say that this has been one of a collective cooperation and significant benefits for the central Arkansas area."

Drake said that while there was a time when North Little Rock was referred to as Dogtown, coined after Little Rock residents reputedly rounded up dogs and dropped them off on the north side of the river, that era is gone. In City Hall, there's a tombstone that reads, "Here lies Dogtown. Born of apathy, buried by civic pride."

Drake said he doesn't agree that North Little Rock ever was a stepchild. If others do, "That's because they don't live here. ... I reject the premise."

While some still abhor the nickname, others are choosing to embrace it. Don Chambers, director of the Argenta Downtown Council, said that there are plans for a dog-theme sculpture project downtown.

"Remember, we took care of those dogs," Chambers said. "We were the kind people who took those dogs in. That's why I don't consider Dogtown to be a negative thing. We're going to make it a positive thing and embrace it."

DOWNTOWN BEAUTIFICATION

On a recent Friday morning, Chambers was on his cell phone off and on all morning, working to ensure that the driver of a wayward truck that ran over and destroyed a flower bed was tracked down and made to pay for the replanting, estimated at about \$800.

That's part of his job as director for the Argenta Downtown Council, which is financed by businessmen and the city. The organization, which was started in February, has taken on the beautification of downtown. Chambers, a landscape architect who moved to North Little Rock in 1991, is one of the masterminds behind the blooming baskets, potted plants and flower beds.

Enhancing the neighborhood's safety has also been one of the organization's goals. It hired two "ambassadors" who act as concierge and security. For example, they recently called 911 when a woman fell off her bicycle when it flipped because a tire got caught in the trolley tracks, Chambers said. They then helped her until the medics arrived.

The ambassadors can recommend a good restaurant or help out in an emergency, Chambers said. The two also "shadow" panhandlers to keep them from bothering patrons. After handing the person asking for money some

pamphlets about how to get help, the ambassador will stand nearby and let those out on the sidewalks know that the person has already been helped.

"I personally find it a rather innocuous way to defuse the panhandling option," Chambers said.

Bob Ragsdale, a council employee, spends seven hours each day watering the plants, starting at 6 a.m. The council takes care of 20 beds between Washington Avenue and Seventh Street, as well as all of the hanging baskets and potted plants.

In addition, the council has set up a contract with a horticultural business that provides the basket liners all ready to go so the council doesn't have to spend time replanting. So far, the baskets have been replanted once in May and once in July - they'll typically be redone every season, Chambers added.

"It's what I call the Disneyland effect," he said. "You go to Disneyland, there's petunias, you wake up and there are marigolds."

All of the services provided by the downtown council are to promote the area, but the organization is not there to recruit, Chambers said.

"We don't recruit businesses," Chambers said. "We create an environment that makes businesses want to be here."

SUCCESS STORIES

The newer additions to Argenta are also boosting the area.

The Enclave "is doing great," said John Gilbert, senior vice president for Bomasada Group, which built the apartments. Units are nearly 70 percent leased and 60 percent occupied. The apartments, which opened in January, range from \$795 per month for 695 square feet to \$2,150 for 1,484 square feet.

Dickey-Stephens Park, which opened in April 2007, is home to Arkansas Travelers minor league baseball and has brought a crowd of pre- and post-game visitors to the downtown area. It also has Bill Valentine's Ballpark Restaurant, which features Italian cuisine.

Argenta Place, the mixed-use development that includes Cregeen's Pub, has sold three of its four condominiums, said John Gaudin, a developer whose group owns several of the buildings along Main Street.

"I would say that since Argenta Place opened the doors, that was a big turnaround point, I think," said Drake, the Main Street Argenta director. "As in any small area like Argenta, I think a big part of that is a great choice in restaurants."

But he said some of the biggest successes can be traced back even further.

Cornerstone Pub & Grill and Ristorante Capeo, which both opened in 2003, "were the two anchors of the 300 and 400 block [of Main Street], of what has now become what we have today in North Little Rock," Drake said. "When I arrived, they had just opened, and they were beginning to generate excitement, develop their own clientele, and what we began to see was the start, the seeds, of long-term prosperity for our downtown."

Brothers Brian and Eric Isaac opened Ristorante Capeo when downtown North Little Rock was still just a ghost town, Brian Isaac said. It was before the trolley, and Cornerstone opened the week before Capeo did, he said. The two banked on events at Alltel Arena - which opened in late 1999 - to bring in people. And, because their uncle owned the building, the price was right.

"It was totally blind faith," Isaac said. As they worked on construction, "I was standing there, and I said, 'People are going to come in here and sit down and eat a nice meal?'"

They opened their second restaurant, Argenta Seafood Co., in December, and it is struggling a bit because of the weak economy, Isaac said. However, the second restaurant was less of a leap, and they knew there would be people downtown. With the trolley system established, North Little Rock is a "destination spot," he said.

NEW ADDITIONS

There are also more projects in the works.

Gaudin said he's in the midst of a new project with 57 townhouses being built on the east side of Maple Street

between Fourth and Fifth streets, with the first model nearing completion. His firm also bought the old Prime Quality Feeds mill behind the U.S. Post Office for about \$1.9 million, and plans to redevelop the property with a mixed-use development.

"It's basically under study right now," he said. "We want to understand the property better and the market."

In addition to Cregeen's pub and four condominiums, Argenta Place will host Argenta Market, a small grocery store that is opening soon. Gaudin and his group also are responsible for the new office space for the Thea Foundation, an organization dedicated to using art for youth development, and the Starving Artist Cafe, among other properties.

Drake said a "brownfield" area - once-polluted land that has been rehabilitated - west of Dickey-Stephens Park is now ready for redevelopment, most likely as a mixed-use project with apartments. Main Street Argenta received a \$200,000 grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 2005 for the cleanup of the former industrial site, and the grant was matched with funding from the city.

Drake also said there's a movement in the works for a master plan for the city, now that most property downtown has been acquired.

Mayor Hays, who spearheaded the effort to obtain the former Navy submarine USS Razorback for the city's riverfront, said Gaudin and other developers who are making their mark on the area deserve kudos.

"They're obviously the private sector and certainly they have a profit motive, but their philosophy appears to me to be 'do it right and gain the return in the long haul,'" Hays said. "Those of us who have been in this business of urban development know that there are certain things that are a cornerstone to the revival of the urban area."

While all of this added up to a revitalized Argenta, Hays said it's hard to pinpoint what caused it.

"I don't know if I could sit and chronicle what I would consider a tipping point, but I could say that in my mind that it certainly has tipped, and now it's not a matter of if, it's a matter of how fast," he said.

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