

Restoration and Revitalization

Draws New Businesses and Shoppers to Downtown

By Catherine Califf-Dean

The landscape of downtown Milledgeville has undergone numerous changes in the past year including restoration of historic buildings, new business openings, improvements on storefront facades, and completion of the Streetscape Phase III project.

The City of Milledgeville completed a \$1.1 million rehabilitation of the former Elks Lodge to serve as an economic development center. Located at 105 East Hancock Street, the building houses the offices of Milledgeville Main Street (MMS), the Development Authority of the City of Milledgeville and Baldwin County (DAMB), City Planning, Code Enforcement, Human Resources, and Engineering and Inspection.

“The idea to renovate the old Elks Lodge was a long thought about project that was finally decided upon by City Manager Barry Jarrett,” said Carlee Schulte, MMS director. “The renovation was a huge undertaking that has now reaped many benefits to the community. The building is large enough to house the majority of all City Economic Development activities to provide the ‘one-stop shop’ design that is growing in popularity.”

The building at 101 South Wayne Street has also gone through an extensive renovation and was renamed The Soho. Owned by Kim and Marty Martin-owners of the Antebellum Inn Bed and Breakfast-The Soho has been lovingly restored with many original features kept for charm value.

“The Martins love old buildings with beautiful architectural details and rich history,” said Matt Meanie, property manager for both The Soho and Antebellum Inn. According to Meanie, The Soho was originally built in 1890 has been the home to numerous businesses, including a barber shop and dance hall.

The top floor of the building houses four upscale apartments that serve as extended stay suites for those wanting a unique and luxurious experience in the heart of downtown. Each suite is stylishly decorated and offers cable television, a desk with complimentary wireless internet, sound machines, and fully equipped kitchens and private baths.

Street-level, The Soho building includes the new businesses of Verizon Wireless, Sugar Plums, and SweetTreats. Sugar Plums offers gourmet popcorn and treats all the way from the Savannah Kitchen Company. SweetTreats is a bakery and ice cream shop offering homemade cakes, brownies, and hand-dipped ice cream.

Another successful avenue for downtown shops joins the DAMB, MMS and the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) together to help businesses refurbish their storefronts through

the 50/50 Façade Match program. The program funds are an incentive for current owners and potential business owners to restore, renovate, and repair the exteriors of downtown buildings.

A 50/50 match up to \$1,500 per property is awarded to those applicants that meet the historical requirements set forth by the committee. The program is in place to make downtown more inviting to shoppers and tourists visiting Milledgeville. In 2014, recipients included Amici Italian Restaurant, the Red Door Antiques and Gifts, and Blossom's Florist.

Opening within the last year, several new boutique stores including Eclectic, The Market Collective, and Upcycle, chose to locate their businesses downtown. The Lemon Tree, a favorite among college students, moved to Hancock Street in order to enlarge their store.

Eclectic opened last October and is filled with unique jewelry, scarves, and gifts. The owner, Karen Barrett, said she wanted to offer customers unusual items at a good price. "I like the atmosphere of being downtown," said Barrett. "My experience here has been good."

The Market Collective carries new and vintage home goods, clothes, jewelry, and wedding décor. Items can be bought but also rented for weddings, photo shoots, or any special occasion. Owner, Donna Collins, says she has always been drawn to vintage items and felt the business was a perfect fit for downtown.

"The building was a market for many years, so, we wanted to honor that heritage in the name," said Collins. An old, original sign for the market was found in the basement of the building while setting up the business. It now hangs in the shop as a reminder of days past.

Two established businesses, Need a Nerd and Oconee Outfitters, are expanding and will share a space in the former Joyner's Market building.

"Over the past five years, downtown Milledgeville has truly transformed. Upon winning the Great American Main Street Award, Main Street/DDA set out to do a total rebrand of the downtown area and create more pride in our community," added Schulte. "We are so grateful to have an amazing mix of business downtown that work together to promote and grow the area."

