

October 9, 2009

## Downtown proves it's a great place

These days, you take whatever good news you can get and start a celebration. Fortunately, there's a lot to celebrate about downtown Greenville, and even better is that people who live far from here are recognizing that Greenville has a lively, dynamic downtown that any city would be proud to claim.

Thursday's newspaper brought news that Greenville's Main Street has been cited as one of the 10 "great streets" by the American Planning Association. People who live here had already figured out as much. People who visit most often are "blown away," to use the current marketing slogan, when they first see our downtown area.

Downtown Greenville is a prize, starting with its tree-lined streets and safe environment. When you throw in some absolutely great restaurants, the top-of-the-line entertainment found at the Peace Center for the Performing Arts, and Falls Park and the Liberty Bridge, you have created a downtown that is loved by people here and studied and copied by those who live elsewhere.

Today starts the beginning of a weekend food festival that grew from a modest endeavor 28 years ago to one of the region's top draws every mid-October. The St. Francis Fall for Greenville will feature food from 40 restaurants, live entertainment and much more beginning at 5 p.m. today through 7 p.m. Sunday.

Fall for Greenville has grown beyond what anyone would have imagined almost three decades ago. Main Street is packed shoulder-to-shoulder with people eager to sample some of the finest food around and enjoy the entertainment.

The fall food festival is just one of the things that helped give life to a once-dying downtown. Restaurants played an essential role in Main Street's recovery. Those restaurants provided a reason for many people who live outside the city to come downtown at night and on the weekends. Many of those restaurants took quite a risk when they staked their bottom line on downtown's recovery.

Today downtown restaurants are bucking the national trend, *The Greenville News* reported Thursday, because they are holding their own during this deep recession unlike many restaurants across the country. And foodies who come downtown are rewarded by a selection that includes everything from shrimp and grits to lobster enchiladas. Restaurant patrons also encounter some top chefs, including Victoria Moore of the Lazy Goat. She's now officially one of the nation's top up-and-coming chefs. Moore will show up in the November *Esquire* as one of the four "breakout chefs to watch."

Downtown Greenville's rebirth is no accident. The new statue honoring former Mayor Max Heller stands as a reminder of how the vision and boldness of this one elected leader helped reshape the city. About four decades ago, Heller — along with two leading businessmen at the time, the late Buck Mickel and attorney Tommy Wyche — set out to restore life to the downtown area and turn it into an open, welcoming place.

Then as current Mayor Knox White wrote on our pages last month, on the occasion of the 5th anniversary of Falls Park, "the falls, the public garden and the stunning suspension bridge complemented our already unique Main Street."

None of this, from the Hyatt Hotel to the Peace Center, from the restaurants to the inviting open spaces, would have been possible without strong leaders in the public and private sectors.

Greenville is constantly getting well-deserved recognition for its efforts. Just two months ago AARP named Greenville as one of the best places to live in this country, right behind Tucson, Ariz.

So if you haven't been downtown in a while, check it out, because other people certainly are. This weekend is a great time to start with the St. Francis Fall for Greenville.

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