

# Downtown Augusta seeks tipping point to revitalization

## Steps to recovery

By Carole Hawkins

Staff Writer

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For more than two decades, government and businesses have reinvested in downtown Augusta. Still, the tipping point for revitalization – at which market forces alone drive redevelopment – has remained elusive.

Though a new convention center and downtown streetlights could help the effort, at least one measure of Augusta's vitality so far disappoints.

The number of downtown businesses dropped 27 percent over the past decade, more than a third of that before the recession.

The figures come from an analysis by *The Augusta Chronicle* of business licenses issued from 2001 to 2010. *The Chronicle* separated 1,121 downtown businesses from more than 20,000 electronic records provided by the county license and inspection department and identified the 4,522 licenses that had been issued to them for the decade. The survey included addresses from Greene Street to the Savannah River and from Fifth to 13th streets.

The analysis showed that the number of business licenses issued downtown dropped every year but one, falling from 499 in 2001 to 443 in 2007. By 2010, license issuance had fallen to 362. The number of addresses where the downtown businesses were situated remained stable for most of the decade, but fell during the recession, for a 14 percent loss overall.

Margaret Woodard, the executive director of the Downtown Development Authority of Augusta, challenged the results.

"You have to look at the entire district. We don't do just Broad; we do Ellis, Greene, Telfair and Laney-Walker," she said. "We're seeing a trend of a net gain of 60 to 70 businesses opening every year since 2005."

Asked whether the results for downtown alone surprised her, Woodard said, "I can see it, in a way."

Asked whether Augusta revitalization has reached a tipping point yet, she said, "No, we have not."

Though the number of downtown businesses has not grown, office and residential renovations have, and that is the trend Woodard said she finds encouraging.

In recent years, businesses such as Toole Engineering, ESi, Bees Knees and Soy Noodle House have expanded and in some cases renovated, she said. Two years ago, the Emporium housed an antiques business before it underwent a \$3 million renovation. The project added nine loft apartments that are now occupied, even though the retail space below remains vacant.

Woodard said residential growth is what will bring revitalization to the tipping point. The effort seems to have traction. Downtown apartments have waiting lists, she said. All nine of the Emporium's units rented for above-market rates within 11 weeks, she said.

"(The tipping point) will be getting people living downtown. We'll keep (homing) in on that," she said. "It brings upper-end retail, better services, a UPS store."

## Steps to recovery

A 2005 Brookings Institution study, though, said downtown revitalizations are more typically based on redeveloping a walking entertainment district, followed by residential development.

“Urban entertainment creates a ‘there there,’ the initial reason people want to live downtown,” the study said. “It is followed by rental housing, where young urban pioneers come for a unique lifestyle not available in the suburbs.”

The study, “Turning Around Downtown: Twelve Steps to Revitalization,” said revitalized cities have created entertainment districts by attracting or developing arenas, performing arts centers, sports stadiums, megaplex theaters, restaurants, specialty retail districts, festivals and arts venues.

Rental housing follows that effort, then for-sale housing, retail, and finally, office employment. For-sale housing typically appears within six to 10 years after the entertainment district is initiated, the study said.

Christopher Leinberger, a senior fellow in the Brookings Institution’s Metropolitan Policy Program and the study’s author, said research since 2005 shows it’s OK to emphasize certain steps, such as residential development, out of order.

“It was generally the case that urban entertainment came first, but sometimes people are just so confident in downtown they skip the earlier steps,” he said.

Asked whether it is normal for the number of businesses to drop during a revitalization except for recessionary years, Leinberger said, “No, it is not ... there should be an increase in businesses created. It sounds like you have to ask yourselves some questions.”

Though revitalization has not yet broken out all over downtown Augusta, several blocks show signs of renewal.

As part of the downtown analysis, the newspaper produced a heat map of locations where business licenses were issued during the decade. Locations were rated from “hot” to “cool.” For example, red shows locations occupied by a business for either nine or 10 years. Blue shows locations occupied for one or two years.

The resulting map closely mirrors the distribution of empty buildings downtown. Locations on upper Broad Street, west of James Brown Boulevard, show a higher incidence of business occupancy stretching across all 10 years. Lower Broad east of James Brown, cross streets and other locations off Broad show less business activity.

Leinberger said the results are not surprising.

“Recovery tends to start with just a few blocks and then proceed block to block,” he said. “A block can feel like a mile, especially if people are feeling nervous because there’s not many people on the street.”

### **Changes to area**

Business owners from blocks where revitalization has yet to take hold are understandably more frustrated than those occupying the red zones. Some on lower Broad whose downtown roots go back decades spoke bitterly of panhandlers, a deteriorating physical environment and a slow-to-respond local government.

Silla Tae Mitchell, the owner of Silla Café, an Asian restaurant at 855 Broad St., said she has seen change for the worse during her 10 years in business.

“The city gives a lot of liquor licenses on Broad Street. There used to be more family stuff downtown, car shows, bands. Families want to come to museums, not clubs,” she said.

Asked whether more residences could bring business growth, Mitchell said, “People say we are going to grow with more apartments, but I don’t see it. Every corner is a club. Everywhere is a bar. People are not going to live here.”

On upper Broad Street, things are better. One strategy that has helped is Artists Row, a collection of galleries that begins at 10th and Broad. David Hutchison moved his business, The Book Tavern, from Eighth Street to Broad’s 1000 block six years ago because of the foot traffic.

“Overnight, we were suddenly making money, from the day that I moved in here,” he said. “Back on Eighth Street, every day had been dead. I held that place together on Ramen noodles.”

Across the street from Hutchison, in Broad’s 1100 block, Ooollee Bricker is expanding her vintage-clothing shop into the adjoining storefront. She said the numbers on her balance sheet have gotten better every year since she opened in 2008.

“What is happening downtown is happening on the 1000, 1100 and 1200 blocks,” she said, adding that empty storefronts dotting lower Broad slow the foot traffic there. “This is where the occupancy is.”

### **New center**

Hardy Meyer wants to be part of the movement to make lower Broad a destination spot. He rented, renovated and will soon open a jazz and blues club on the first floor of a building that sat vacant for three years.

Situated at 877 Broad St., it’s a straight shot in one direction from the soon-to-open downtown parking deck and convention center on James Brown Boulevard. Augusta Common, an outdoor events venue, lies a few steps in the other direction.

“I think business is moving this way,” Meyer said.

Hutchison said that despite upper Broad’s strength, revitalization in downtown as a whole seems to have stagnated.

“Our downtown development authority is very concerned with project development, like the TEE (Trade, Exhibit and Event) Center or the White’s Building,” Hutchison said. “But they’re not resourced to figure out how we attract businesses and get them started down here. Typically, a development authority will have a Main Street program as a partner.”

A Georgia Main Street designation signals to tourists and investors that a city is pursuing downtown revitalization according to a set of nationally recognized standards. Augusta’s Main Street program fizzled in 2006 after the resignation of its executive director. Its board disbanded, and programs such as Saturday Market and First Friday were picked up by the Downtown Development Authority, according to Woodard.

Today’s recipe for revitalization might have left out business recruitment, but Hutchison still looks forward to projects such as condos, street lighting and a soon-to-be completed convention center expansion.

He predicted the new center would be a game-changer and would extend redevelopment into lower Broad.

“The way we’ll get to revitalization is with effort, effort, effort, effort, effort, effort,” the businessman said. “And, at some point, you reach this magic point where you tip over, and everybody wants in.”

## **ABOUT THE ANALYSIS**

For this project, The Augusta Chronicle obtained electronic business license records from Augusta’s License and Inspection Department. From more than 20,000 records of licensed Richmond County businesses, 1,121 that fell within the downtown boundaries were selected.

The list was built by comparing the table of licensed businesses to a table of downtown parcels provided by Augusta’s GIS department and selecting the ones that had matching parcel identification numbers. Forty percent of licensed businesses are at locations that represent a secondary address for the parcel, and these licensed business records have no PIN. Downtown businesses from this group were found by checking three address fields in the records – location, temporary and mailing – and selecting those with downtown addresses. Where conflicting addresses existed on the same record, Internet searches were performed to

confirm the business's advertised address, and satellite mapping was used to confirm that the disqualified address did not fall within a business district.

It was concluded that the final 1,121 downtown businesses had a total of 4,522 license renewals issued between 2001 and 2010. Licenses were grouped by year and totals were counted to determine whether downtown businesses grew, fell or remained stable for the decade.

## **COMING MONDAY**

Empty buildings discourage shoppers by creating a sense of neglect, and downtown Augusta has a big problem in that area.

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