

# ➔ IN PROGRESS: THE EMPORIUM OPENS

## Downtown's Newest Renovations Boasts Luxury Living Options

The Emporium grand opening and ribbon cutting ceremony took place on January 25th, with building owner Natalie McLeod, Downtown Development Association executive director Margaret Woodard and Augusta Mayor Deke Copenhaver in attendance.

It took a year, but now that the fence has been removed from the face of the 2.7 million dollar Emporium historical rehabilitation project and the nine new apartments will "set the standard for luxury living in downtown Augusta," according to Woodard.

"It takes people with vision and perseverance to make downtown flourish in tough economic times," said Copenhaver. "The city of Augusta would like to thank Natalie and Mack for their dedication and for all of their hard work."

Sadly, the project, which started with an abandoned building and a creative idea to furnish it with modern amenities, held its grand opening the day after the funeral of Wallace "Mack" McLeod, Natalie's husband. The building has been dedicated in his honor.

"We've had hundreds of people work on this project, so many that I can't mention them all, but that's a good thing and I truly appreciate them all," said Natalie. "Above all, I'd like to thank my husband, Mac, who truly believed in the downtown and wanted this to happen, and who supported me when I needed it most."

Natalie also thanked architect Alan Venable, Capers and Associates, the Queensboro National Bank and all the contractors and subcontractors who worked on the building over the last year.

"We had one year to accomplish all this work, and the contractors deserve a medal for all the effort they put into this," said McLeod. "Some of the guys probably feel that they live here because they've been in here so much."

McLeod sincerely hopes that her dream will end up benefitting the whole of downtown Augusta due to the types of residents she hopes to bring in.

"Most of the people who have lived here (downtown) tend to be the type who only need a room for a year or two while they go to school or wait to get a bigger place, but this building is appealing to

permanent residents and trying to bring them into the community," she said. "When people live someplace, they have more ownership and they're more interested. Those who can afford upscale housing like this are usually more involved socially and politically and because they're permanent residents they may feel obligated to get involved in the downtown community."

Already, two of the nine apartments have been rented and another two are expected to be leased very soon. The commercial space on the first floor has yet to find an owner, and Rex Properties (the leasing agent) is still seeking businesses interested in having a Broad Street storefront.

While work continues inside the building, most is limited to the "punch list" - those last minute spots that need touching up or cleaning. The building's electronic security system should become operational within a few weeks and the last major undertaking, putting up tile on the façade, was completed on the last day warm enough to work with the glue.

"They keep sweeping the floors but everyone here just keeps walking over them, so they'll probably have to come through and do a really thorough polish sometime on the weekend," said McLeod. "Some kitchen islands and frosted glass still needs to come in, but for the most part the work is done."

Small examples of McLeod's personal touches abound within the building, including the carpet tile she personally laid in one elevator and the pair of arched doorways on the second floor that she sanded and stained in her own garage. Other mementos point to the historical nature of the building, including the saloon style doors in some bathrooms, and the original stair banisters, which were reused as table legs in several of the kitchens.

McLeod imagines that her role as building owner will never be finished and may even consider moving into the building at some later date. For now, however, she would like to sit back and see how the community embraces her finished project.

"Even though the management company has taken over most of the leasing and other duties, I will always have something to offer," she said. "In another five years we'll hopefully be turning these apartments into condos, and I hope to be an active part in that process as well."



ABOVE: MAYOR DEKE COPENHAVER HELPS EMPORIUM OWNER NATALIE MCLEOD CUT THE RIBBON. BELOW: SNAPSHOTS FROM THE NEWLY RENOVATED EMPORIUM BUILDING.

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