



# Everything old is new again



going whole hog, they opted to redo one block a year to stay out of debt. “That way, we didn’t have to fund these projects with bonds; we could just write them into our annual budget,” explained the mayor.

Of course the city could not do it alone. “The merchants in downtown exhibited a remarkable cooperation,” recalled city

administrator Greg Dieterick. “They came together to not only promote their businesses but to promote Seneca itself.”

Merchants formed the Seneca Merchants Association and began working closely with the city, the county and the Blue Ridge Arts Council.

“We all communicate a great deal to make sure the events we plan complement one another, instead of conflict,” said Dieterick.

And there are oodles of events. One popular event, held every other month or so, is Downtown Go Round. Merchants stay open late to showcase their wares to the nine-to-five crowds, offering special deals and discounts.

May’s Arts on the Alley showcases and promotes local artists. Since 2003, the community comes together at this free festival to browse through pottery, ceramics, watercolors, acrylics, jewelry, photography and more.

During the summertime, Music on the Green is a popular event for residents and visitors alike. Nearly 8,000 people attend these concerts, held in the refurbished park at the railroad depot.

The city supports these events using proceeds from hospitality and accommodations taxes.

Also officials increased accessibility to the area by partnering with the Clemson Area Transportation bus line to include downtown Seneca on its routes. “We’re trying to open up Seneca to the outside world,” said Dieterick.

The outside world has come to Seneca it seems. A few years ago, Seneca was named one of the best places to retire by a retirement magazine. “We hadn’t thought of ourselves that way before,” says City Clerk Belinda Harper, “but we knew we had to run with it.”

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In the late 19th century downtown, Seneca, at the time just a small railroad town, was bustling ... with cats.

Ram Cat Alley, the original Main Street of Seneca, was home to throngs of cats lured there by flatbed carts that carried fish and meats to nearby grocers. Locals joked that there were so many, “you couldn’t ram another cat into that alley.”

Today, downtown Seneca is bustling once again, but thankfully with visitors of the human variety. Upstate residents flock there to shop, eat and attend the many community events held in the historic area.

Seneca officials have proven that sometimes economic development is as simple as redevelopment. City leaders worked with what they already had to bring folks back downtown.

In the mid 1990s, Main Street was a ghost town, following the exodus of businesses to state Route 123, five miles from the city center. Buildings sat in disrepair, dark and dingy. Not even cats wanted to hang around in downtown.

City officials figured if anyone was going to venture back onto Main Street, they would have to lead the way. So they started investing money in the historic buildings in Ram Cat Alley and the surrounding blocks of downtown. They started small, installing new street lights and fixing cracked sidewalks.

“People definitely took notice when the city started investing in downtown,” said Mayor Daniel Alexander. “It was a domino effect after that. One person bought a building, fixed it up, and pretty soon the building next door was purchased, too.”

That little taste of success inspired city leaders to continue their downtown redevelopment. Instead of



“If you have a great downtown area, there are only two ways it can move; it can go forward and grow, or move backward,” Petrie said.

The City of Columbia also has its own retail recruiter to focus on growing the number of businesses in downtown. The City Center Partnership hired Amy Stone a year ago to bring retail and food service establishments downtown. The City Center Partnership, a non-profit organization, manages Columbia’s 36-block Business Improvement District.

Stone said she has been identifying the businesses already in place downtown and evaluating where there are voids. She’s seeking businesses that would appeal to residents and visitors and that would compliment existing businesses downtown.

“We’re finding businesses that we think there is a need for, that have a high chance of being successful, and that would attract other businesses,” Stone said. “I spend a lot of time pounding the pavement, looking for businesses that fit that mix.”

Stone is not focusing on retail chains. Instead she is looking for boutique-type businesses, ones that perhaps are family-owned with other locations and are looking to expand.

“We do not want to duplicate the malls,” she said. “We want to be a reason for people in the suburbs to make a trip downtown. It’s a trend that many other towns and cities are following.”

Like Petrie, Stone offers demographic information to attract potential businesses. She can tell clients how many residents live minutes from downtown and how many people work there. Stone said Columbia has a tremendous amount to offer, with the University of South Carolina, the State House and Fort Jackson all centrally located. Some 2.4 million people visit these and other sites in Columbia each year, she added.

“We want to provide places for them to shop, places to eat, and places for them to enjoy themselves and be entertained in the evenings,” she said.

Stone uses an aggressive, low-key approach to attract businesses downtown. While the process is slower these days due to the floundering national economy, it’s important for cities to continue to attract and retain businesses in order to be competitive and grow, she said.

Although her focus is the Business Improvement District downtown, Stone noted that she is there to serve the area as a whole.

“If I think a business is perfect for Five Points, I refer them there,” she said. “The bottom line is: we’re all in this together.”

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community,” Kirkland said. “This feature allows the city to emphasize this partnership and the continued emphasis on civic growth and business success in Aiken.”

Back in Mount Pleasant, McKenzie and her team also believe the key to moving their town forward lies in the success of local businesses. The Town Council has made a push to promote and support local businesses. Municipal staff is encouraged to buy as many products locally as possible.

“We want citizens to shop local, and in order to set an example, we do so as well,” McKenzie said.

While Mount Pleasant is focusing on adding more commercial sites, it hasn’t defined a specific industry that it’s seeking. That may come after the town’s comprehensive plan is updated.

“We’re looking at a lot of different things,” McKenzie said, “We want to become a top tourist destination.”

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The city began running ads in lifestyle magazines to boast about the quiet, lakeside community. Now seniors flock to find a quiet town, with mild weather and milder property taxes.

The city hasn’t forgotten about tourism, and recently purchased the Lunney Museum, previously owned by the county. The museum contains many Oconee County historical artifacts. It is on the National Register of Historic Places, as well an attraction on the South Carolina Discovery Route. “We want to make sure we hold on to our history,” said Mayor Alexander.

Seneca is doing the job of holding on to its history while embracing its future. Officials have partnered with organizations in the private sector to fund a business study of the city. “We’ll be able to better target the businesses that would be a good fit for us,” explained Dietterick.

Seneca’s success is an example of what can happen when a city mixes the right amount preservation, partnership and perseverance.

And that’s something to meow about.