

Downtown vision

Revitalizing Beaumont's central business district

By Jerry Jordan
Managing Editor

It's taken nearly 20 years to get to the point where it is today, but Beaumont's downtown is beginning to resemble the thriving business center that it once was.

Heading into the 1980s and continuing into the late 1990s, the core business area of downtown Beaumont all but died as a lack of infrastructure investment and the exit of many of the businesses that once kept foot-traffic high sought out new locations to sell their wares.

The ESM savings and loan scandal of the 1980s left Beaumont short about \$20 million, and the trend to take businesses out of a central business district and move them to strip centers and shopping malls had a devastating effect on what was once the economic center for all of Southeast Texas. Since then, the only reason most residents visited downtown was to serve on jury duty, pay taxes, check out a book from the library or pay a water bill at city hall — and that was during the day. At night, it became somewhat dangerous as drug dealers, thugs and panhandlers moved in.

"I lived here all my life and Beaumont was a great place to live and raise a family then. And downtown was a highlight of those days," said Pete Shelton, former city manager, retired fire chief and president of the Port of Beaumont Board of Directors. "It was still a happening place in downtown even into the '60s and '70s; the deterioration really began over the past 25 years or so. And it got bad."

Still, some stalwarts hung on. While downtown crumbled around them, they invested in Beaumont's future. The renovations of the Stedman Fruit Company building and the old Sante Fe Depot was the catalyst for future development, but it took some time before others opened their pocketbooks.

But during that time, there was also a movement being pushed by a determined assistant city manager, who wanted to see more private businesses move back to downtown.

Even before he was appointed as Beaumont city manager in 2002, Kyle Hayes went to bat for those who shared his vision. He took the fight to his then boss, Stephen Bonczek, who wasn't keen on the idea. Bonczek was more worried about taxing businesses for water runoff from their parking lots than he was about saving Beaumont. Still, Hayes knew this was a worthy fight, even if he was risking the ire of his boss.

Hayes explained he had seen other cities that had taken their rundown and all-but-abandoned downtowns and transformed them into a destination point for locals and tourists alike. Those cities



Photo by Jerry Jordan

Beaumont city manager Kyle Hayes

made it attractive for business to return and, once again, people wanted to go downtown. That was what was needed in Beaumont, Hayes told *The Examiner*.

"I started here in 1993, and I kind of had a feel for what had transpired in downtown," said Hayes, who grew up in Port Arthur and saw that city's downtown collapse as businesses bailed out of the area. "The Stedman building and the Sante Fe Depot kind of cemented our northwest area of our business district but not much else happened in the '80s or early '90s. Then a number of things began to come into play in the late '90s."

One of the first groups to jump onboard was the Crockett Street Development Group, which began a massive plan to renovate an entire block of buildings and transform them into an entertainment destination. It was a public-private partnership unlike any in the city's history with the city giving up some tax breaks and business loans and the stakeholders of the Crockett Street Development Group putting up the funding to build a first-class dining and entertainment venue. Three restaurants, four nightclubs and dozens of block parties later, there is no denying that it serves as an anchor for other opportunities that

continue to come about.

Hayes wasn't alone in his desire to see Beaumont resurrect its downtown business district. He also had the backing of Becky Ames, who ran her campaign on the promise that she would fight for downtown.

Ames went on to be mayor and Hayes became the city manager, but they never lost focus on their plans to transform downtown Beaumont.

There was a public-private partnership to revitalize the Jefferson Theatre and the Hotel Beaumont, and the city began investing more money into the downtown corridor. As time went by, the Beaumont Convention and Visitors Bureau moved out of city hall and anchored the entry into downtown from Interstate 10. Grants sought to reconstruct streets and drainage projects — some of which are still underway — helped attract investors, who saw the city was serious about downtown.

"I think both Kyle and the mayor had a vision for downtown, of trying to bring it back to what it once was," said Tom Warner, city of Beaumont public works director. "Whether it be trying to bring in entertainment or government offices, they wanted to bring as much life into downtown as they possibly could. And I think that has been achieved through a lot of the projects in the downtown area."

In fact, the retro lighting and brick sidewalks now adorning nearly all of downtown wouldn't be there had Hayes not gone to bat for Crockett Street Development.

Currently, the city is moving forward with its drainage improvement project, which allowed the city to reconstruct Calder Avenue and redevelop the roadway that serves as the primary artery for access to downtown. Hayes again saw the city's chance at improving the aesthetics of the city when Beaumont secured federal funding to alleviate flooding in other parts of the city. By tearing up Calder Avenue, it allowed for new brick-paved sidewalks, a bike lane and the opportunity to bury unsightly overhead power lines.

With the blessing of City Council, Hayes pushed the city forward to take in the rundown areas of downtown and transform them into a city park that will house a new Harvest Club, a two-acre lake and concert stage area overlooking what is being called "The Great Lawn."

Although those projects are not yet complete, construction is underway, just another example of the city's investment in itself. The next part must come from businesses and private investors, who

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Ames



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want to take advantage of the new downtown Beaumont.

Next month, Hayes said city leaders will meet with a group from Birmingham, Ala., that is interested in partnering with local investors to locate a hotel adjacent to the civic center.

"Most of what has occurred in downtown has come from private investment, when you look at all of the renovations," Hayes said. "We provided the infrastructure and the community did the rest. When Crockett Street came in, the city staff and I met to devise a plan to expand those improvements to the rest of the downtown area. We defined our Central Business District as about a 40-block area from Calder to College and from Neches Street, later MLK, to the river. It all feeds on itself. As we moved forward, so did the people and businesses wanting to invest in our community."

Ames said she is proud of the city's investment in downtown.

"A city without a downtown central business district is not a thriving city," Ames said. "If you go to any city across the United States, the majority of the ones that are doing well have a thriving downtown. And I have believed that since I ran for office the first time. I always believed that if we built the infrastructure for the development, then they would want to invest their private dollars. Kyle and I worked very well together in that vision because we believed that we had to give our citizens something more than just outlying areas."

And the improvements have not gone unnoticed by investors, who have poured money

into numerous projects in and around the new downtown.

A dozen years ago, the thought of living in downtown wouldn't have been on anyone's radar but now, thanks to the city's infrastructure investment, not only are there trendy new townhomes at Cathedral Square but also several small mom-and-pop operations like Suga's, Hamburger Depot, New York Pizza and Pasta and The Barking Dog Coffee Lounge scattered about.

Christina Delgadillo, who was involved with the Crockett Street group and owns the Beaumont Club, where many of the city's power brokers gather at lunch, said without Hayes it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to make the Crockett Street Entertainment District a reality.

"You know this idea of downtown development might be new for some, but this is what Kyle has been focused on for quite a while. And Becky's campaign was centered around bringing back downtown development," Delgadillo said. "It has been great for business. The city's commitment is what gave other businesses the confidence to invest in downtown and there is no doubt that you are seeing the positives of that vision with everything that is happening here."

Whether it be a night of dancing at the Dixie Dance Hall, dinner at New York Pizza and Pasta, coffee at The Barking Dog or just a stroll down Orleans Street to take in the ambiance of the bricked

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sidewalks and gas-style lights, it is impossible to ignore the transformation that downtown Beaumont has undergone.

"It makes me feel good to see the improvements that are being made, and I think it is great that things have been turned around," Shelton said. "It is something for all of us to

be proud of. I think it is drastic improvement and I think it will continue to come back. When I grew up, everything centered in the downtown area. It was just a great place to go after school and there was always something going on. We had five or so movie houses in downtown and some

good restaurants, too. Teenagers would ride around and a group of us would go and drag down Pearl Street. It was a fun time, it really was. You have to have the interest of the people involved with the city, and I think you are seeing that. We have never taken advantage of the riverfront along the Neches

River, and that is something that the port and the city have been working on to remove the rail lines.

"Kyle has the interest of the entire city at heart. He wants this community to be nice and he really cares about the appearance of downtown and the things that Beaumont can

provide. I am proud of Beaumont. I am happy to have grown up here and I think it is a great place to live. We just need to provide something to hold our young people here, and that ought to be our No. 1 concern. I know that is something that is near and dear to Kyle."