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Get Gaines Going: It's great to be a part of this future

David Malcolm
My View

Three years ago, the "Lumber Barn" at 612 S. Copeland St., probably looked odd, tired and abandoned to many people. We saw potential written all over it.

Some reminders of the old building, one block off of Gaines Street, remain intact today. Once inside, visitors to Wood+Partners Inc. (WPI) are taken aback by our design studio's dramatic two-story, bead-board ceiling, pine crossbeams and telltale massive barn doors. In this open and airy creative work environment, our team of landscape architects and land planners transform concepts and dreams into three-dimensional realities for clients.

WPI originated in 1988 in Hilton Head Island, S.C. In 2005, when we wanted a second location, we selected Tallahassee for its distinctive sense of place and community. A year later we opened a third office in Atlanta.

From these three bases we service clients in the Southeast and Caribbean, providing planning and design services for communities, resorts, colleges and institutions, parks and recreation, commercial centers and villages, and redevelopment plans for downtowns and urban areas.

Our firm made a conscious decision to plant roots in downtown Tallahassee and participate in the revitalization effort like many we have helped craft for clients and communities. When we removed the "for sale" sign, it was hard to miss that we were smack dab in the middle of the shabby and neglected Gaines Street corridor. Again, we saw potential written all over it.

While visionaries for years have dreamed that Gaines could and would someday be an arts and entertainment district where people live, work and play in safe surroundings, as the new kid on the block, we stepped up to the plate and said, "Okay. We'll take a chance."

It was easy. As planners and urban designers, transformation runs through our veins. While we recognize that government will be a vital partner in the redevelopment of Gaines Street, the true basis for this renaissance will be other private entrepreneurs who also envision future potential, like our neighbor, the Marriott Residence Inn.

We have been a part of the design team for the master plan of the commercial center of Evening Rose, a mixed-use community which will incorporate retail and commercial offices with residential units, a central park and village green.

In Perry, we are designing a traditional mixed-use community using historic Cypress Mill's 250-acre, urban-infill property next to Main Street. The project offers natural connectivity between the new development and downtown, and could help spur additional growth, boosting the entire city's economy.

Clearly, landowners spend millions of dollars to create from scratch many of the attributes already in place along Gaines and recent developments will accelerate the process.

The recent \$375,000 grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for pre-development of the Arts on Gaines projects speaks volumes about realizing the potential of Gaines Street's future as a quality, cultural center for all to enjoy. All Saints area is becoming a popular downtown destination and on the opposite end of Gaines, the historic WaterWorks building has been saved and Cascades Park will open in two years with world-class amenities and activities typically found in much larger markets.

The proposed Performing Arts Center will serve as the area's cultural centerpiece. Our firm is proud to have donated conceptual design services for the new Charles Hook Sculpture Garden at Railroad Square, a unique project to draw more attention and business to this unique conclave of creativity.

The Knight Creative Communities Initiative has renewed buzz to Get Gaines Going. By engaging new participants, well-established urban redevelopment practices are beginning to be accepted by groups of passionate citizens willing to help build momentum.

If you're of a similar mindset, come down to the neighborhood, visit our studio and see what "The Barn" has become. You may find yourself visualizing what an old roadway can become. And perhaps you'll take the ultimate step and join us as a property owner and continue the transformation that we believe has already begun.

David Malcolm, ASLA, manages the Tallahassee office of Wood+Partners Inc. (WPI) and serves on the board of Keep Tallahassee/Leon County Beautiful and the Urban Design Commission. Contact him at dmalcolm@woodandpartners.com.