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BUSINESS BOOMS AROUND THE BAY

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FEATURE STORY

Crowning Achievement

By ROBIN DELANEY



The late Bert Winterbottom of LDR International had revamped downtown Baltimore's waterfront with great success, so his company was brought in as the chief real estate planner and consultant.


Miller's ad hoc Mobile Downtown Redevelopment Commission brought in community leaders from an array of interests. The *Press-Register* joined in with optimistic publicity under the last years of Bill

Hearin as publisher. WKRQ TV was hired to produce a video. Downtown Mobile businesses were surveyed as to their wants and needs in the LDR charrette process.

Just another downtown study, was the predictable cry in 1990, but this proved to be a downtown master plan that would have a regional impact, and ultimately result in more than \$400 million in public-

private investment – an amount even the most skeptical locals had to appreciate.

Like most cities, downtown Mobile was a ghost town after the malls were constructed at the I-65 Beltline. Local business leaders and Mobile's core franchise businesses clustered out west as the suburban expansion began its march toward the Mobile Airport.



From a String
of Pearls to the
Crown Jewels,
a brief history
of modern
day Mobile

Imagine if you will three men sipping coffee from fine china in a secluded downtown historic building. The year is 1990. Mayor Mike Dow, attorney Jack Miller and city executive and consultant Al St. Clair sat in Miller's office on State Street, when the words were spoken for the first time: the *String of Pearls*. Each pearl in the downtown development wish list would add luster to a collective necklace of investment that would be a new beginning for Mobile. And so the story begins.

Outlaw's own Morrison's and Ruby Tuesday's headquarters were in west Mobile. Business leaders E.E. Delaney, Jay Altmayer, Billy Lyon and Kenneth Giddens built Springdale and Bel Air Malls side by side. Giddens's WKRC left downtown, as did Gavfer's department store. Airport Boulevard sprung subdivisions on each side like a kudzu vine stretching toward the sun. The heart of the city relocated and

west Mobile was born.

But in 1990, Mike Dow – who's QMS juggernaut was also located in the west – put together a team to dream the dream of a new Mobile. And what a pipe dream it was! The first artist sketch was laughable . . . a major hotel downtown connected to a convention center, a fancy IMAX theater, a science museum, a maritime museum, a new skyscraper, a

cruise ship, a new combined city and county government building all under one roof, and people walking on sidewalks along Dauphin Street and Fort Conde Village shopping, dining, or even living, plus a new city museum, a waterfront park, ferries crossing the bay, and on and on. What a joke!

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Nobody is laughing today, however. In 15 years Mobile, against all odds, accomplished almost of the entire plan. Thanks to new additional team members – the *Press-Register's* Howard Bronson, RSA CEO Dr. David Bronner, Sen. Richard Shelby (along with Sens. Jeff Sessions and Sonny Callahan), then County Commissioner Sam Jones, the Mobile Junior League, the J.L. Bedsole Foundation, and many other corporate leaders – Dow, Miller and St. Clair began to complete one Hail Mary after another.

Carnival Cruise was a major accomplishment, thanks to incentives and investments from Bronner and U.S. Rep. Jo Bonner (R-Mobile) initially. The momentum grew and grew . . . the Exploreum IMAX Museum, the Riverview Plaza, the City-County Government building, federal grants of transportation-improvement dollars for granite sidewalks and waterfront parks, the Dauphin Street entertainment district suc-



Former Mayor of Mobile, Mike Dow

Press-Register file photography

cess, support from Bender Shipbuilding, Cooper Stevedoring, the State Docks, Celia Wallace's Battle House dream, Palmer Hamilton's historic residential vision, and on and on. One by one, the

string's pearls were added.

The contributions were from hundreds of citizens and companies, helping dispel the rumor that this was just an easy task done by a few Old Mobile rich

people. This was in reality a difficult task of blood, sweat, tears, and personal sacrifices of time and money. Many gave of their time and money, without any public recognition, because they love Mobile and believed a vibrant downtown was essential to a healthy, modern, progressive city.

Today the String of Pearls is completed, and the *Crown Jewels* have begun. The same economic principle applies, where one major investment supports and even helps finance another, by a growing tax base and critical mass of clustered economic activity.

The largest of the *Crown Jewels* are Bronner's RSA Tower, Alabama Cruise Terminal, Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, The Battle House and the Grand Hotel renovations. E.B. Peebles is leading the Gulf Coast Maritime Museum toward realization. The new *Press-Register* building anchors De Tonti Village. Condo and residential development is being led by pioneers like Ann Bedsole and

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RSA CEO Dr. David Bronner

her late-husband Palmer.

A new Saenger Theatre, the Centre for the Living Arts, Space 301, a renovated Catholic Cathedral, Christ Church Cathedral and many other historic churches, office buildings, shops and homes, arts and cul-

tural projects all represent private capital being invested in new crown jewels that enhance the seed-public capital and financing begun 18 years ago.

The city is spending \$400,000 with EDSA, Inc., designing A New Plan for Old Mobile, which it says is a vision for downtown and midtown to be "regionally and nationally recognized for its quality of economic opportunities married with exemplary residential standards," resulting in a "vibrant, diverse culture and importance in the nation's heritage."

The Crown Jewels are larger than pearls, and their impact is greater. They range in location, industry and scope, and each is as tangible as were the early Pearls. The Thyssen-Krupp Steel mega project is the most obvious, with a myriad of impacts to be realized over the next several years. The State Docks Container project will multiply times ten the annual container shipments, again a catalytic investment hard to calculate in value.

The USA and Mitchell Foundations' investments at the University of South Alabama have introduced new dynamics in technology, medicine and education. The Brookley Industrial Complex and MAE aerospace component has al-

ready landed a crown jewel just by being an EADS-versus-Boeing finalist.

component is the final crown jewel to insure the success of downtown Mobile. Other crown jewels impacting the Mobile Bay region – known simply as

"Mobile" – include the Dale Earnhardt Raceway (led by Dow), the Spanish Fort Roger Staubach Bass Pro attraction, the Alabama's investment in the Battleship Causeway Five Rivers complex and the new Mobile Bay Bridge. Not to mention the jewels of community investment in living spaces like Fairhope, Springhill, and other areas showing the determination to survive as attractive communities within suburban growth corridors.

Together these residential and tourism components join with business investments to elevate Mobile to a new level dreamed of ever since Brookley AFB left in the 1960s. Forward-thinking community leaders are working every moment of every day to prove just how progressive and youthful this old city truly is. Mobile dreams big and in regal style, befitting the adornment of pearls and a shining crown – one that all Mobilians are lining up to try on.

Robin Delaney also writes for www.coastalalabama.tv.



Attorney Jack Miller

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