

A Time To Reflect On Our Decisions From Thirty-Five Years Ago

Back in 1972, our community and our nation were obsessed with ending the conflict in Vietnam and selecting the presidential nominees for the major political parties. Locally and across America, regional malls and strip shopping centers were being built at a rapid pace along new cross county or circular road systems that were allegedly necessary to ease our commute time. As a result, most older once dominant commercial districts, like Downtown Pensacola, were experiencing a decline like never before.

Almost half of the spaces in the buildings of downtown were vacant. More than a few were boarded up or whitewashed over. Many who could get out had done so and moved to one of the new suburban retail centers or very near it. Many more were lamenting the fact that Downtown's best days had passed and it was now destined to be a crude imitation of the new malls or an unvalued relic of times gone by. While such sentiments were readily heard during those times, there remained those in both the public and private sectors that were not ready to write-off the future of Downtown Pensacola or its place in defining and preserving a sense of community uniqueness and pride. That group of business owners, elected officials, and local property owners refused to join the movement to push downtown onto the trash heap of a by-gone era.

A group of local visionaries took up the challenge to save downtown and compete with the new commercial centers popping up in areas that had just a few years earlier been forest and/or farmland. They resolved to turn the tide of disinvestment, reuse and re-occupy the historic fabric of Pensacola, and bring the crowds of local and regional citizens back to the one true heart of our community – downtown. Bold leaders like Jim Reeves, Nathan Kahn, William Pasco, William Pace, Bob Snow, John Hagler, and many others stood firm in their commitment to a vital downtown. By their courageous and outspoken leadership, they inserted their fortunes, their futures, and their reputations firmly in support of leveling the competitive playing field for all downtown stakeholders.

They advanced their cause through many individual investment and business decisions and established the Pensacola Downtown Improvement Board (DIB) for all who believed as they did to help reverse the trends which had been building since the end of the second World War. Over the next three and one half decades, these community-minded leaders and dozens more like them worked tirelessly to renovate or remodeled white-elephant buildings, stage special events and festivals, seek state and federal funding for needed downtown projects, clean the sidewalks, beautify the streets and parks, stage local celebrations, encourage and facilitate new investment and businesses, advocate for additional police presence, represent the interest of local downtown property owners in public policy debates, plan for new sidewalks, signage, and traffic patterns, preserve many of our historic places, and promoted the uniqueness and opportunity of downtown Pensacola throughout the region. Such remains the mission of the DIB to this day.

Downtown has changed a lot since those dark days of the early 1970s. Many great brick and mortar changes as well as small repetitious promotional events have set the stage for

what we enjoy today and what we see just on the horizon. It really all started to come together and gain momentum when a group of local visionaries decided that downtown was worth saving all those years ago.

On Thursday, September 27th, the DIB will celebrate its thirty-fifth year of existence. Part of the pomp and circumstance of that day will include a recognition of those that had the vision to create such a self-help vehicle as well as the dozens of other stewards that have served unselfishly in the downtown leadership from 1972 to 2007. Those of us that work downtown or own property or a business downtown today as well as all of Pensacola owe them a debt of gratitude for literally saving the character, identity, and uniqueness of this place we hold so dear. It's altogether fitting that we pause this month to say a heart-felt and sincere thank you for a job well done.