



COLUMBUS, mississippi



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A vibrant part of downtown Columbus's great nightlife, Huck's Place is a family restaurant that opened in 2008 in this beautifully renovated JC Penney building.



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Afternoon Tunes is one of several concert series that keep people coming downtown all year round.

DOWNTOWN AND "THE LIVIN' IS EASY"

So easy in fact that Columbus, Mississippi, leads the state in downtown housing with nearly 150 upper-floor apartments. Quaint lofts and luxurious penthouses have replaced empty attics; and once-boarded-up windows now reflect a downtown brimming with activity. Much of the credit goes to Main Street Columbus, which helped redefine a tired, declining district through ordinances that allow mixed uses and upper-story living.

PRESERVING A SENSE OF PLACE

Graced with distinctive historic architecture ranging from the 1830s to the early 1900s, Columbus has also embraced a strong preservation ethic. In 1985, when the program started, vacant storefronts abounded and many historic buildings faced demolition. Over the past two decades, Main Street Columbus has worked with property owners and government officials to revise city ordinances, develop design guidelines, and encourage the use of historic tax incentives. Today, 98 of the commercial district's buildings have been rehabbed, many through the use of the federal historic tax credit.

The first rehabilitation projects downtown involved plans for ground-floor retail, with apartments above. Working with Main Street Columbus, the owners of the buildings got city ordinances changed to allow upper-floor housing, which has become a major downtown attraction.

"Occupancy in downtown apartments is high," says Ruth Taylor Berry, a downtown building owner. "Vacancies don't last long. People enjoy living downtown now because there is a feeling of excitement and anticipation of more good things to come. Main Street Columbus has been and continues to be the driving impetus that propels these successes."

To showcase building improvements, Main Street Columbus worked with private citizens and city and county officials to restore the town's historic clock and install historic street and entrance signs. New benches, light poles, and banners have also

added to downtown's ambience. Main Street's design committee continues to play an active role by developing a downtown beautification plan that includes seasonal plantings, watering systems, tree plantings, and park and recreational development.

Property owners have also made a strong commitment to help downtown look its best. When a small alley needed to be improved due to construction of a parking lot after a fire destroyed several downtown buildings, property owners stepped in to help. They donated their alley property to the city, which made a walkway with landscaping and new lighting. The telephone company placed its lines underground and the gas company replaced its main line as well. The result created a welcoming environment for pedestrians as well as enhancing downtown's appearance.

Thanks to the strong work and partnerships of the Main Street program, downtown remains the central gathering place for the community. All city and county municipal buildings are located downtown; the local television station relocated to the district and renovated an old department store; and the Mississippi University for Women is a cornerstone of the downtown.

A SURGING ECONOMY

By creating a methodical plan to keep all governmental offices downtown, Main Street Columbus has been successful in recruiting law firms, investment companies, and other businesses that work closely with the city and county. Through Main Street Columbus's strong partnerships with the city and Lowndes County, the downtown has also benefited from the area's increased local industrial development.

To retain current businesses and entice potential entrepreneurs, Main Street Columbus has compiled a building inventory, published a shopping and dining guide, created numerous retail promotions, and conducted parking and traffic timing studies. The organization has also developed a strong relationship with absentee property owners, resulting in a low inventory of such properties.



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The recently renovated Hitching Post Farmers' Market is open three days a week from May to October and serves as a community gathering place as well as a spot to buy all kinds of fresh produce.

The Mississippi Coffeehouse, conveniently located on Main Street, is a community gathering place as well as a stop for hundreds of Columbus residents and workers every morning.

Through customer and business surveys, Main Street Columbus has built a strong case for recruitment and retention of retail businesses. The downtown has successfully retained many downtown restaurants and, over the past two years, has seen nearly \$7 million invested in downtown properties, with

60 other activities that have attracted visitors to Columbus for the past 14 years and earned the city recognition from the Southeast Tourism Society for the last decade. More than an award-winning entertainment venue, the Market Street Festival has raised more than \$500,000 for revitalization projects.

new customers for us and increase our repeat business.... Columbus Main Street is known as a destination; therefore, our restaurant is known as a destination.”

“In today’s world where sustainability, renewal, and reduction of sprawl are tossed around as concepts, Main Street Columbus is transforming these ideas into reality.”

Todd Gale, Manager, Columbus Light and Water

The new two-and-a-half-mile Riverwalk invites residents and visitors to stroll from downtown to the Tombigbee River and the National Register-listed Old Columbus Bridge, which originally pivoted to permit steamboats to pass through. The area also features a riverside park with staging for outdoor events, and a proposed soccer complex and nature parks are in the works.

All this and more keeps Columbians involved, active, and spending their money in their hometown. But downtown Columbus is more than just a commercial district. It’s more than just a neighborhood. It’s a community and a “shining star” among Mississippi Main Streets.

new investors continuing to seek opportunities in the district.

Looking back two decades, the change in downtown’s economy has been remarkable: “In the 1980s, you couldn’t give away a downtown building,” says real estate professional and Main Street Board President Brad Belue. “Today, there are only a few remaining and investors are willing to pay top dollar for them.”

A SHINING SOUTHERN STAR

Named a 2008 Dozen Distinctive Destination by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, this shining Southern city annually welcomes more than 40,000 visitors to its award-winning Market Street Festival, which spreads over 12 city blocks and has more than 400 volunteers and 70 local sponsors. The two-day festival welcomes talents from all over the country, including more than 250 arts, crafts, and food vendors; six entertainment stages; 20 musical acts; and more than

To keep people coming downtown all year round, Columbus also offers Noon Tunes, Afternoon Tunes, a Sounds of Summer Concert series, a Wassail Fest, and seasonal downtown open houses, as well as a New Year’s Eve Block Party. And for food lovers, there’s the six-month-long Mississippi Certified Farmer’s Market, located in a renovated historic facility with more than 50 vendors selling the freshest local produce.

This full calendar of events is also helping boost downtown business. “During these events, we always have a packed house,” says restaurant owner John Bean, “They bring in

:: Columbus by the Numbers ::

Population	25,944
Date revitalization program started	1985
Net number of new jobs	827
Net number of new businesses	175
Number of building rehabilitations	98
Number of new buildings	2
Vacancy rate when the program began	21%
Vacancy rate today	11%
Dollar amount of public investment	\$6,671,347
Dollar amount of private investment	\$31,782,273
Website: http://www.columbusmainstreet.com	
Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/MarketStreetFestival	