

Mixed-use in cards for Church Street

By David Wilkening

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ORLANDO — If Chad Martin owned Church Street Station, the first thing he would do is visit the office of the mayor.

"I'd run, not walk, to the mayor's office and ask them what do they want downtown. After that, maybe we could do a little horse trading," said Martin.

Martin is not part of the latest group to purchase the long-time ailing Church Street Station, once one of the state's best-known tourist attractions. But he is the president of Pointe Orlando, a successful entertainment/shopping complex, and a marketing consultant whose work these days is taking him to areas as diverse as China and Atlanta.

In addition, Martin was the marketing director with Church Street's original developer, Bob Snow, who opened the complex in 1974.

What happens to Church Street Station seems of particular importance because of a paradox about Orlando's downtown. In terms of housing and other development, downtown is becoming a star at the same time that its shiniest attraction has become ringed with rust.

While Martin admits he is far from having all the answers, he and others have some ideas about what should happen to the development. But those don't necessarily jibe with the latest owners, a local group

called F.E. South & Co. that bought the prime 7.5 acres in downtown for the bargain price of \$15.9 million.

"I see Orlando as a town that's becoming a city," said Robert I. Kling, president of F.E. South and manager of the Church Street project.

And Orlando needs more downtown than just a tourist attraction, Kling said, referring to a long-term redevelopment plan that will eventually include an office tower, multi-family tower and hotel on 3.5 of the site's unimproved acres.

But, for now, work will begin on the existing buildings as renovations start on the Cheyenne Saloon and its adjacent banquet hall and ballroom, Kling said. The 100,000sf Exchange, once exclusively retail in nature, will be converted to a mixed-use with offices above and retail at street level.

Rosie O'Grady's Good Time Emporium and Phineas Phogg's Balloon Works have been closed, and F.E. South is in negotiations to bring in tenants that will serve a growing downtown residential market. Kling said there's a real need for grocery stores, dry cleaners, restaurants and the like — in addition to some evening entertainment.

"We see this no longer as a tourist attraction. We see this as an urban infill site," Kling said.

F.E. South has hired McBride Companies to serve as architect on the project.

"He's (Kling) keeping the best of what was created and giving it a use that's current," said company President Pat McBride. "It's time to give something back to the city that people want."

One of the partners is Daryl Carter, a local specialist in land sales. The local group bought the property for a simple reason, he said.

"We thought it was undervalued. We saw an undervalued asset and thought it has a tremendous upside potential. We thought we could turn it around and create more value," he said.

One of the major advantages of the property is its huge size for a downtown parcel and its visibility from I-4.

"We've got seven blocks of frontage along I-4, so it's a very high profile property. The property is its own billboard," Carter said.

But Tom Kohler said he strongly prefers something besides offices on the site.

"We don't need more office space. There might be an opportunity for a bed and breakfast there in a unique setting," said Kohler, executive director of the Downtown Development Board.

Church Street Station used to bring in up to 60 buses a day filled with tourists from around the Walt Disney World area, but that market began to dry up when Disney built Pleasure Island and Universal Studios added its own entertainment venue, CityWalk.

Kohler does not think Church Street could return to a tourist-based market, but he does think a retail-entertainment complex similar to Church Street's roots could have a wide appeal for local residents.

"I think they need to refocus to address the residential market here," he said.

Downtown's population is set at 16,500 residents. But new upscale apartments will add another 3,000 residents by the end of 2003, many of them with high incomes.

"They have household earnings in the \$60,000 to \$70,000 range," Kohler said.

Orlando's downtown was a far cry from that kind of upscale income almost three decades ago when Bob Snow began to envision Church Street Station. But, as Martin recalled, the group then had a vision of what they wanted.

Martin was involved with another group that tried to buy the complex years later. They came up with such "horse trading" ideas as finding a way to trade some property at the city of Orlando's Lynx bus site to put up a small hotel.

"We envisioned a small, boutique, Park Plaza Gardens-type of hotel, with meetings," he said.

The key to Church Street's future success, Martin thinks, is to find ways of keeping the 50,000 or so people who work downtown in the area after dark.

"There has to be a marketing plan for that," he said. "How do you make it a great place to visit? How do you make it a fun place for everybody?"

CHURCH STREET

Martin also thinks some good promotional ideas would revive Church Street such as its old nickel beer nights.

"Light Up Orlando is gone, but why is there a Fringe Festival only once a year," Martin said.

Certain types of retail would also do well at Church Street, Martin maintains, even something as simple as a hardware store.

"With all the new residents, a hardware store might do well if it was a Restoration type of store. Hardware may sound silly, but when you start talking about all those apartments going up downtown, it makes sense," Martin said.

A large-scale grocery store — long lacking in downtown Orlando — might be another type of retail operation that could be successful at Church Street.

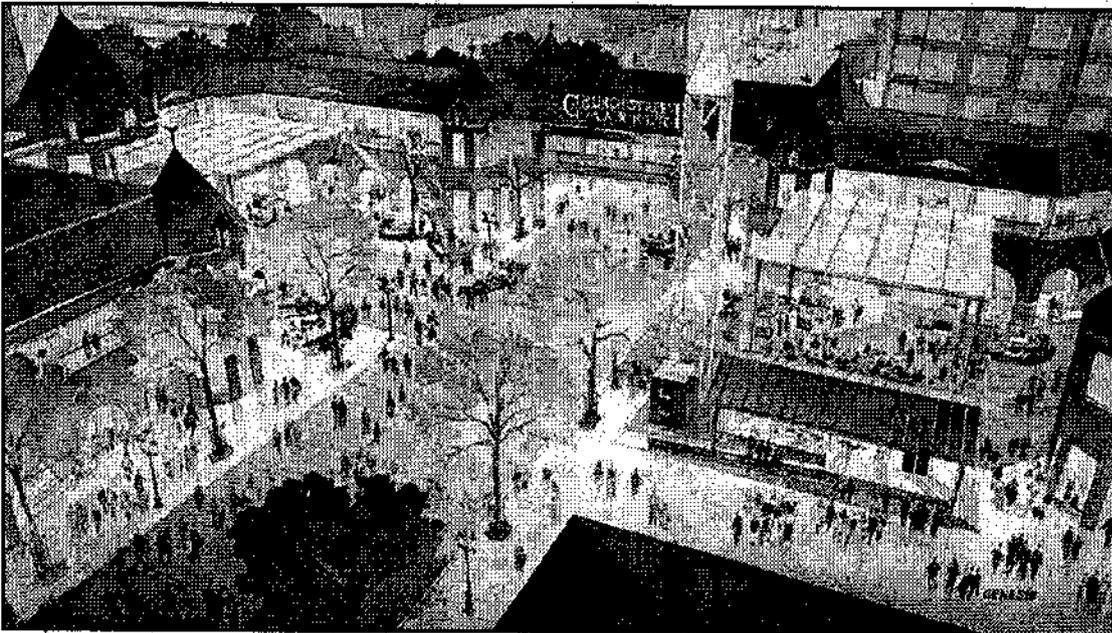
A six- to eight-screen movie theater might also be complimentary with other entertainment venues, Martin said.

"People might want to catch a beer at Rosie's and then see a movie," he said.

Martin makes the point that more sophisticated residents accustomed to upscale areas such as Disney's Pleasure Island are no longer content to simply be satisfied with just another bar or restaurant.

Right now, there are plenty of places for downtowners to drink a beer but no major food stores and certainly no movie theaters.

CHURCH STREET MARKET RENOVATIONS



ORLANDO — VOA Associates Inc. announced that it has been retained by Euro American Management to provide full architectural design services for the renovation of Church Street Market's two retail courtyards in downtown Orlando. The project calls for the addition of a new stage, a 60-foot icon tower, a new stairway, planters and water features, and lighting and sound system improvements. Completion of the renovations is scheduled for September.