

Main Street Project revisited

Georgetown's downtown Square wasn't always the beloved jewel it is today

By LINDA FLORY McCALLA

In 1981 Georgetown was chosen to be a Texas Main Street City, a coveted designation that would bring about a dramatic transformation of what was then a tired and somewhat worn-out downtown. Looking at the impressive collection of vintage buildings that surround the newly restored courthouse today it is hard to believe that this beautiful historic district was anything other than the picture perfect downtown that we know and love. Long-time Georgetown residents know differently.

A snapshot of the Courthouse Square in 1981 reveals old and neglected buildings with decayed architectural features, peeling paint, boarded-up second floor windows and sagging awnings. Sidewalks were cracked and crumbling and in certain places around the square the stench of bat guano was overpowering. The Palace Theatre was a seedy old movie house on its last leg and there were no places to eat. While downtown Georgetown was still the center of what was then a very small town it was no destination, not even for local residents.

The Main Street Project changed all of that. Spearheaded by the City of Georgetown the Main Street Project transformed this shabby, forlorn downtown into a nationally recognized role model of what could be done to reverse the downward spiral of decay and dilapidation that gripped most small towns across the country. Developed by the national Trust for Historic Preservation, the Main Street concept is simple: economic development within the context of historic preservation. The program focuses simultaneously on four key areas — organization, design, promotion and economic development.

Recognizing the importance of a vibrant, healthy downtown to the community, the City of Georgetown and a dedicated succession of Main Street Project managers led the way in literally pulling downtown Georgetown up by its bootstraps. Downtown business and building owners, the Georgetown Heritage Society and other civic organizations, city and county governments, and interested citizens came together in a way that they never had before and the result was just amazing. Almost overnight the square became a beehive of activity as first one building and then another was renovated.

To kick things off, local lenders — two banks and three savings and loan associations at that time — joined forces to create a low-interest loan pool designated for façade renovations. Business and building owners reached deep into their own pockets to fund both simple façade improvements and major projects alike that included installing commercial kitchens for new restaurants and even converting long-vacant second floor space into elegant offices and new residences.

In the first few years of the project the physical appearance of almost every downtown building was improved as more

than \$10 million in private sector money was reinvested in the core central business district. New businesses opened throughout the downtown and several established businesses expanded. This dramatic transformation was very exciting and the community fell in love with its once unkempt downtown all over again. Quite a return on the city's initial investment in the Main Street manager's salary!

In addition to bringing quality design to the downtown buildings the Main Street effort focused on:

■ **ORGANIZATION** — Getting groups and individuals working together to problem solve and plan for the long-term viability of downtown.

■ **PROMOTION** — Developing ideas that would position downtown as an attractive, inviting place for local residents, potential new businesses and tourists.

■ **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT** — Actively working to retain and expand existing businesses and bring new ones downtown that would enhance the retail and business mix.

From the beginning and throughout the 29 years since the Main Street Project began in Georgetown, the city has taken the lead role, giving credibility to the idea that downtown is important to any community and worth saving. After a number of buildings were renovated and the appearance of the square significantly improved, the city initiated a project to upgrade the sidewalks, lighting and landscaping and at the same time began to renovate its own buildings to contribute to the distinctive character of the downtown historic district and create more functional, attractive municipal space.

In addition, the city purchased other buildings as they became available to expand the base of city offices in the downtown area and built not one, but two public libraries downtown. In parallel fashion, Williamson County Commissioners made significant decisions over the same period of time keeping the courthouse and jail complex and a number of county offices downtown.

The significance of this systematic commitment to downtown by both the city and county government cannot be overstated. A healthy downtown is dependent on a constant flow of people coming and going. These government offices insure a steady stream of people from various parts of the community coming downtown to do business.

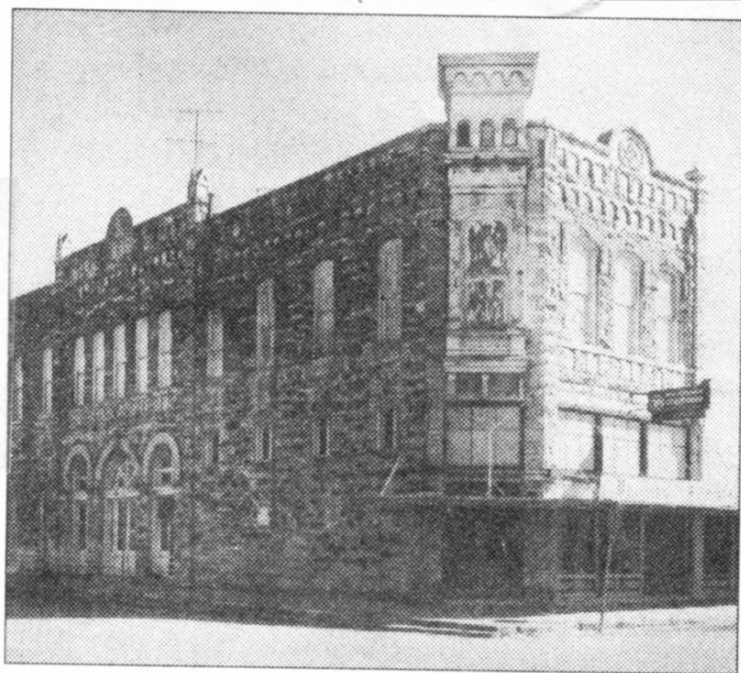
In its first year, the Main Street Project became the gold standard for the program and has held that position ever since. Widely featured by the media on a local, regional, and national level, Georgetown's early and sustained success at reversing the downward economic spiral of its beautiful historic downtown is well known. Because of this work the city has been recognized with many awards, including a Great American Main Street Award and First Lady's Texas Treasures Award. Governing a city with the growth

rate and complex issues that we face in Georgetown is no easy task. Diverse interests and present needs must be met while planning for a future that is sure to include a greatly expanded population. The mayor, city council, and city administrators are expected to be good stewards of the city's resources and to make wise decisions that will serve the city well for years to come. Many in the community believe that moving long-established offices out of the historic central business district would have a lasting negative impact on our downtown. In fact, the city's Downtown Master Plan calls for

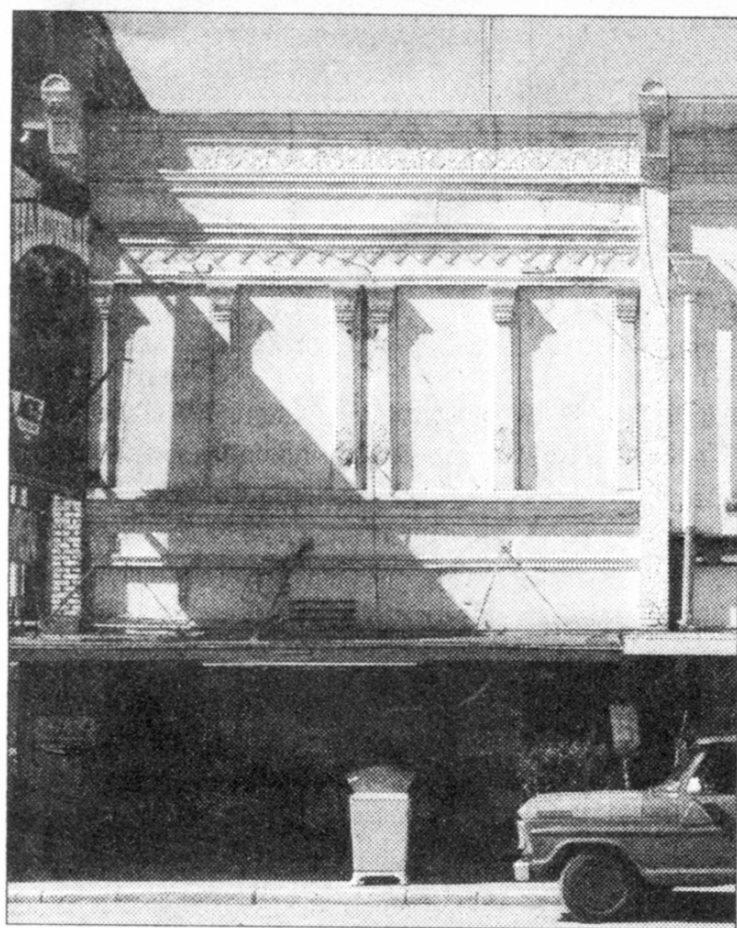
keeping downtown city offices in place and expanding when appropriate.

It is easy to look at our lovely downtown and think that the work of saving it has been done. The reality is that without an ongoing commitment to sustaining a healthy, vital downtown our Main Street success will come undone. Historic downtown Georgetown is the crown jewel in this town that we love. Let's continue the good work that has been done in the past to insure its future.

Linda Flory McCalla was Georgetown's first Main Street Project director. She lives in Georgetown and is owner of Linda McCalla Interiors.



The Masonic Lodge before and after the city got serious about its Square in the 1980s.



The David Love building before and after a renewed emphasis on the downtown area in the 1980s.



Photos provided by the Main Street Project
The Makemson building before and after the renewal of the Square in the 1980s.

