

Rebuilding History for Today's Urban Lifestyle

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Four years ago, when asked by the Johnson City Development Authority to help them define some private development projects to jumpstart the redevelopment of downtown Johnson City, I found a city filled with promise. Its greatest asset was the strong group of local entrepreneurs dedicated to making something happen.

Since the days of Tipton Jobe, when the railroad first came to town, downtown has been the center of community life. On Fountain Square crowds would gather, it was the home of government, churches, retailing, banking and entertainment for a rural community. Agriculture and manufacturing were the mainstays of the economy. As happened in many cities around the country, downtown became the victim of community growth. The suburbs grew as mom, dad and the three kids looked for a new way of life. The malls and strip centers were built and the city grew leaving a hole in the center.

Today it is the university and health care which are the leading economic engines that fuel Johnson City's economy. They are helping to spawn many small businesses that are looking to gain a foothold in a growing economy. The entrepreneurs of today are often quite different than those of the past. Often called the creative class they build their businesses on intellectual capital. They are looking for a new space where again they can gather, work and play. The majority of today's households are singles, couples, or two unrelated individuals. Across the country, people have been moving from the country to the city. Since 9/11 they have been moving from the big cities to the safety of smaller communities like Johnson City and Asheville.

These folks are used to an urban environment, rich in restaurants, culture and nightlife. They want a living and working environment where they can easily meet others and don't have to get in their car to find something to eat. Downtowns historically have provided this environment. The urban centers of Johnson City, Bristol, Kingsport and Greenville offer the last opportunities for an urban environment left in East Tennessee. The Urban Redevelopment Alliance (URA) was created as a

development company dedicated to rebuilding the urban centers of East Tennessee.

URA is a local development service company owned by Tim Jones, B.J. Miller, Guy Wilson and Chuck Tessier. It provides services in planning, project management, brokerage and property management to investors and property owners in the urban areas of East Tennessee. Our goal is to have a first class development team that wakes up every morning to make something happen. URA has been joined by a dedicated group of investors from Western North Carolina, East Tennessee and Virginia who are providing the investment capital. These are community leaders that have seen it happen in other areas and understand the importance of a strong city center. These investors have bought properties individually and have joined together in several different real estate ventures.

One group, Tipton Street, LLC, has purchased the majority of the block at the corner of Buffalo and State of Franklin creating a place called Tipton Street. The existing buildings will be redeveloped into a mix of residences, shops, offices and restaurants. Construction is to start this spring with the first residences to be ready by late summer. Another group has bought the King Building, initially restored by Marvin Carter. The common areas are being redone and the upper floors developed for a variety of new businesses. The exterior of the Hamilton Bank Building has recently been restored to its original grand façade. All together, URA and its investment partners have purchased over 14 buildings and with the development of Tipton Street will have invested over ten million dollars in the rebirth of Downtown Johnson City. URA has also recently begun some initial consulting work in Downtown Bristol.

It is our hope that this initial investment will be the catalyst for much more to come. We envision the whole Med Tech Corridor along State of Franklin from the Hospital to downtown being the center of growth in Johnson City. Fountain Square once again needs to be the central gathering space for the community, a traditional town square flanked by newly redeveloped buildings. Downtown needs to be a destination for fine dining, retail and cultural activities for locals and tourists alike. Many people have worked for years to rebuild the center of our city and it will take the continued efforts of all of us to make this a reality. So if you have an interest in investing, locating your business or living in downtown join us in this exciting endeavor.