

Rising from the ashes in Lowell

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By Joe DePriest



Life along North Main Street in Lowell has picked up; crossing the street with care is the new normal for this once-sleepy downtown. PHOTO BY JEFF WILLHELM

I got there a day after the fire.

It had made the news - a big one with towering flames visible for miles.

In June 2008, the blaze gutted Lowell Family Restaurant and a washerette/dry cleaners next door.

As I walked around downtown, the air still heavy with smoke, North Main Street looked pretty forlorn.

I remember going across the street from the burned buildings and talking to Jim Campbell, owner of Campbell's Jewelers.

He'd been in business there for 50 years and witnessed Lowell's ups and downs.

Commenting on the fire, Campbell said: "We'll recover...there's no doubt in my mind. Things will get better."

He was right. Things are definitely getting better in Lowell.

For months, friends have been telling me to take a look at downtown, and I finally got around to it.

I started at the spot where I stood in 2008, looking at a disaster.

Working together

Today, a new building houses Greg's Family Restaurant, downtown's popular hub.

As my friends suggested, I got there early to avoid crowds. After 11:30 a.m., finding a parking space can be a problem, they said.

Inside, the restaurant was already doing a brisk business. Owner Greg Kroustalis took a few minutes off to tell me about the operation he opened seven months ago.

He's 66, runs restaurants in Matthews and Statesville and has been in the business for more than 40 years.

Lowell looked like a good opportunity. The restaurant is open seven days a week and has about 20 employees.

The menu offers lots of specials, along with dishes like the owner's signature homemade lasagna. A friend of mine who eats breakfast at Greg's raves about the huge slices of country ham that come with the eggs.

My wife and I recently ordered a vegetable plates and gave it a thumbs up. (Our favorite was the fried squash.)

Kroustalis said business is booming. From what I could see, the restaurant is drawing plenty of folks into the central business district.

City Manager Ben Blackburn told me the city's Octoberfest and Light Up Lowell festival at Christmas have been popular. So was the first farmers market, which ran from June through November.

Lowell banners are nice touches downtown. And the city is installing new sidewalks linking the district to new neighborhoods. Ultimately, the system will run from downtown about 1.5 miles to the county's George Poston Park.

Also, decorative wrought-iron railings are going on elevated portions of the sidewalk system.

Pam Smith, president of the recently organized Lowell Merchants Association, said downtown is being dressed up "from top to bottom."

A spring fest is in the works and plans are moving ahead for another farmers market.

What's making this all happen? "People working together," Smith said.

And that's not just folks in the downtown area but all over the city.

Lowell, population about 2,900, is locked in by neighboring Ranlo, Gastonia and McAdenville. But it touches some prime real estate: exits 22 and 23 on Interstate 85 and Franklin Square.

Eastern Lowell is on the South Fork River, where the Carolina Thread Trail will come through. (The river is an asset the city needs to develop more in the future.)

I hope the folks in Lowell can maintain the progress they're making, especially in a downtown I've always thought had great potential.

It's not a boom town yet by any stretch. But Lowell is getting there.

'Where I want to be'

Before I left, I checked in again with Jim Campbell, who is still fixing clocks at the same spot.

He recalled the days when his business was one of only two others downtown.

It was a time when you didn't have to look both ways when you crossed Main Street.

Happily, those days are gone. Crossing the street, especially around Greg's restaurant near lunch time, requires your close attention.

Campbell is pleased with the way things are going in his hometown.

Right there on Main Street, in the heart of little Lowell, "is where I want to be," he said.

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