

Leander hopes to make downtown a fun place - City - Austin American-Statesman (TX) - March 2, 1998 - page B1

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Something about the Old Town area of Spring, a cluster of shops and restaurants with old-time storefronts and Victorian buildings, appeals to Reese Davis.

“Browse among the more than 150 shops which feature everything from fuzzy teddy bears to fine antiques to homemade fudge. ... You'll want to come back again and again,” says The Souvenir, the newspaper for Spring, a town north of Houston.

That kind of atmosphere, and the tourists it attracts, is what Davis would like to see created in Leander, where he has lived for 10 years. “... what our downtown can turn into.”

The City Council has called on a group of residents to come up with a plan to attract businesses and visitors to a desolate downtown area surrounding City Hall. Davis will head the committee.

The revitalization effort is the latest of several moves Leander leaders have made toward improving this city of 7,000. The City Council signed a contract two weeks ago that will ensure an adequate long-term water supply for residents and businesses. Committees are studying ways to improve city roads and drainage.

“The main thing is we need to have a planned city instead of letting Leander develop wherever,” Davis said. “A planned city would be a much better place for people to want to come and live.”

Spring and Leander have similar histories. Both were bustling railroad communities in the early 1900s, and both are 25 miles north of major Texas cities. At one time, Spring's downtown blocks looked a lot like Leander's now.

“It was what you would call a ghost town,” said Bob Sanders, the largest landowner for the 10-block Old Town area.

“It had been a real active railroad town, but by 1979 all the businesses had moved or gone off. There was no commercial activity at all,” he said.

Today, Old Town Spring is a bustle of activity, thanks to efforts of merchants and aggressive marketing begun in the early 1980s, Sanders said. More than 350,000 visitors each year come to Old Town's shops, cafes and museums. Events such as the Crawfish Festival lure tourists.

Because Spring is not incorporated, the Old Town Spring Association, a merchants group, and the Spring Preservation League provide such amenities as street lights and public restrooms.

“A lot of what happened was just the creative determination of little entrepreneurs, the merchants,” said Melani Bayless, executive director of the Greater Montgomery County Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Davis, who has helped restore three homes in the downtown area, wants to encourage more restoration. He is seeking volunteers for the committee, and each City Council member can appoint a volunteer.

Davis plans for the group to tackle a few issues at a time and pursue money for each project separately.

The City Council has made some preliminary suggestions such as specifying what types of businesses would be allowed in the blocks surrounding Willis Street.

Leander has a start on preserving its old downtown. In November, the city purchased the historic McFarland store, **Leander's** first city hall. The city also bought the half-block of land surrounding the store across the street from the existing **City Hall**.

Mayor Charles Eaton said the city will consider applying for participation in the Texas Main Street program. The program, sponsored by the Texas Historical Commission, helps cities revitalize downtowns with a focus on historical preservation.

The program has helped Georgetown help itself, said Molly Alexander, president of Georgetown's Chamber of Commerce. Georgetown won the National Main Street Award in 1997 from the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Project for restoring and revitalizing its downtown. Also in 1997, Time magazine named the city among 10 small-town success stories.

“What Main Street does is re-establish a core for the city. It establishes a sense of pride and place,” Alexander said.

(from box) MORE INFORMATION **Leander** residents interested in joining the downtown revitalizations committee should call Reese Davis at 267-0113

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