

BOOM/ Property values on rise

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years.

"We've set the stage to be a livable community," declared Mayor David Fischer. "The vision of St. Petersburg — which is really the vision of all cities — is that [downtown] is not only a good place to work and a good place to come for cultural events. It's a good place to live."

The city's renaissance isn't limited to downtown. Citywide, permits for \$184 million worth of new construction and renovation had been issued as of June — on pace to equal or exceed last year's record level of \$344 million.

But the most dramatic changes are happening downtown, once a symbol of stagnation and failed development schemes.

Spurred by a strong economy and small projects that have provided the catalyst for revitalization, developers are choosing downtown

for ventures they might have shunned a short time ago.

"There's improved investor confidence in the downtown area," said Rick Mussett, the city's Economic Development Administrator. "What that translates into is activity and customer generation — so other restaurants will open up, or businesses will expand. It's almost synergistic how that activity will feed off" itself.

With its scenic waterfront, cultural amenities and nearly 700 events a year, ranging from boat shows to art and music festivals, downtown is a natural people-magnet, said Scott Schimberg, executive vice president of Hyde Park Builders, which recently completed a 27-unit town house project downtown called The Huntington.

"The weekend activity that city center attracts is perfect for a residential element," said Schimberg, whose company has built extensively in south Tampa.

"People are going there anyway

as a destination spot," he added. "Those same people were attracted to live there when the opportunity presented itself, because they could walk to where they were driving."

Attracting people to live in the heart of Florida's fourth-largest city — which fashioned itself as a tourist and retirement haven well into the 1960s — also will help bolster a market for retail outlets and other amenities, Fischer said.

This approach marks a departure from the city's previous downtown redevelopment strategy, which for years focused on a single mega-project.

The Bay Plaza Co., the city's master developer for nearly a decade, spent \$37 million trying to turn downtown into a shopping mecca. The city spent another \$25 million before the Kansas City, Mo.-based company pulled out, promises unfilled, in 1995.

Remnants of that failed development effort now figure prominently in downtown's revival.

Florida Power Corp., one of the city's largest employers, is moving 900 workers from south St. Petersburg to three downtown locations, including a long-empty building Bay Plaza built across from the Barnett Tower.

Bay Plaza also left behind two empty lots that now are the sites of a planned \$40 million retail-and-entertainment complex called "Baywalk," which the city council approved in June.

A local development team plans to build restaurants, shops and a 20-screen cineplex on one lot; the city would build a \$10 million parking garage on the other.

Developer and former U.S. ambassador Mel Semblek hopes to open the project about the same time as the larger Centro Ybor project in Ybor City in early 2000.

Nearby, two luxury condo towers going up along Beach Drive will offer well-heeled residents waterfront and cityscape views.

The Cloisters, a \$17 million project whose partners include former St. Petersburg mayors Randy Wedding and Robert Ulrich, is set for completion by February. More

Downtown luxury

Three projects will bring 183 residential units to St. Petersburg's downtown. Prices begin at \$300,000.

