

DOWNTOWN: PROJECTS TO GIVE AREA NEW LOOK

By David Pendered

Downtown Atlanta seems poised to become a destination for family fun, a concept that just two years ago seemed an out-of-reach dream for an uneasy area.

Since early 2003, nearly \$1 billion in projects that promise to transform the central business district have broken ground or are poised to start. Stretches of sidewalks that once were rolled up at night may almost be ready to stay in place for tourists and locals out for an evening on the town.

Centennial Olympic Park has solidified its position as the central business district's main recreational attraction. Its famous fountains are now ringed by the Georgia Aquarium; Imagine It, the Children's Museum; and venues for the Atlanta Falcons and Georgia Force football teams, the Atlanta Hawks and, perhaps again, the Atlanta Thrashers.

The Georgia Dome could be in line for a major renovation. The opening date of the New World of Coca-Cola museum has been set for April 2007, at a construction cost of almost \$100 million.

Beyond the main sightseeing attractions, other nearby downtown destinations are being spruced up. And the central issue of the perception of public safety finally is being addressed.

The ubiquitous and politically sensitive topic of the loitering downtrodden is to be partially remedied with a homeless shelter and service center that is to open south of Atlanta City Hall by July. Mayor Shirley Franklin says public safety is being improved by Atlanta police officers walking beats, in addition to the pith-helmeted crowd of downtown "ambassadors" who offer directions to lost tourists and call authorities when necessary.

The Fairlie-Poplar district offers art galleries, performance halls, restaurants and a set of architecturally interesting buildings that date to the early 1900s. Underground Atlanta, that ever-present barometer of downtown viability, is just south on Peachtree Street. Underground remains filled with numerous shops packed with quirky merchandise that beckons recreational shoppers, and its Kenny's Alley nightclub district is the only place in town that can serve alcohol until 4 a.m. Last call elsewhere in the city is 2:30 a.m.

A critic no less important than Bernie Marcus has applauded the changes in downtown Atlanta.

"We're seeing the development of downtown," Marcus said last week at the annual Central Atlanta Progress breakfast. "Everyone is behind it."

Marcus, a co-founder of Home Depot, donated \$200 million for the Georgia Aquarium. When he announced his gift in 2003, he urged downtown boosters and state officials to match his largess with an equally powerful thrust to reclaim downtown from blight.

Signs planned, too

The list of construction starts since that sunny day when Marcus announced the aquarium is lengthy.

The Coke museum is no surprise, as it was announced along with the aquarium. But after a few apparent false starts, site preparation work began in December, and funding now seems to be in place.

At the nearby Glenn Building, workers have started turning the 1920s-era office building into a boutique hotel with a rooftop terrace overlooking the park.

On the east side of Centennial Olympic Park, the bedraggled Williams Street is getting a huge face-lift. The road serves as a gateway from the southbound lanes of the Downtown Connector to the central business district.

The most prominent project is a new commercial and residential complex under way on a stretch of land that had been filled with strip parking lots and decayed buildings. The proposed Ivan Allen Plaza is taking shape in the form of an office tower for Southern Co. that is to be topped out this spring. A building to house accounting firm Ernst & Young is also set to go.



A tower with 500 condos and 100 hotel rooms is to break ground within weeks just east of Ivan Allen Plaza.

Even the streets and sidewalks in the area are in line for tremendous improvements. And visitors who fear they will get lost can take heart in the \$3 million program to install 150 directional signs throughout downtown.

Most significantly, a \$13.3 million upgrade is under way for the broken sidewalks along the dog-legged corridor that is the most direct route from downtown's hotel district to the park and aquarium, and on to the expanded Georgia World Congress Center. The first phase of the newly named Ivan Allen Jr. Boulevard is to open in November, just in time to serve the expected opening of the aquarium.

The list of future projects promises to continue the transformation of downtown.

At the Georgia Dome, Falcons owner Arthur Blank has offered to provide up to \$150 million in improvements that seem designed to cater to a well-heeled crowd. Blank says that if the state will provide his team with a better revenue program than it now has, he will pay to install more corporate suites, exclusive club level seating and a retail destination that could be open year-round.

The Dome is owned by the state, and its managers say they hope they can reach an agreement with Blank, also a Home Depot co-founder. Swirling under those conversations will be the fact that Blank and Marcus will have given the city a huge shot in the arm by bringing a stampede of people into the central business district.

The Georgia Aquarium is expected to attract 2.2 million visitors in its first year of operation. Attendance at Falcons games has soared 33 percent since Blank bought the team.

Potential astounds

Among other notable projects, downtown is in line to get two hotels in addition to the Glenn Boutique Hotel, plus several new shops near the park.

The same company renovating the Glenn building, Legacy Partners, is finalizing funds to build the Park Pavilion, a hotel with 125 suites and two restaurants. Legacy also plans a related retail project on a building it bought in 1999. Marietta Place is to open in a converted office building and offer shops and restaurants with prices geared toward families on a budget, says Legacy's president, David Marvin. Marvin was a pioneer of building new residences near Centennial Olympic Park and sees the attractions providing a rising tide of future patrons for his new projects.

"The customers will be the existing base of office workers and the growing residential population downtown, and the wonderful new addition to the mix is the tourists who are going to be drawn downtown because of the new attractions — the aquarium, the World of Coke, the children's museum, and Centennial Olympic Park in its own right as a beautiful attraction," Marvin says.

The downtown push is so strong it even appears to be floating the historic Winecoff Hotel. Shuttered for decades, the site of the nation's worst hotel fire is in line to reopen in 2007 as a full-service boutique hotel. Similar plans have been lofted for years. But Atlanta development officials are confident that the new team can finish the job. The Winecoff is to be run by Boykin Management Co., which operates 31 hotels nationwide.

The potential of downtown Atlanta astounds some of its current developers. Jim Borders is one of them. As president of Novare Group, he is overseeing residential projects from Buckhead to Midtown to the site near Ivan Allen Plaza.

"I think about the Centennial Park area in terms of two years from now," Borders says. "I see lots of people on the streets. The streets feeling safe. People enjoying the park and the Georgia Aquarium and the Coke museum. Having all these people walking around is a good thing and a way to create a healthy urban area.

"This is going to be a place where people want to be."



'A place where people want to be'

THE NEW DOWNTOWN

Developments around Centennial Olympic Park.



1 Georgia Aquarium

More than 1 million visitors a year are expected to watch 55,000 aquatic creatures in 5 million gallons of fresh and salt water. The \$200 million gift from Home Depot co-founder Bernie Marcus is to open late this year on land provided by Coca-Cola Co.



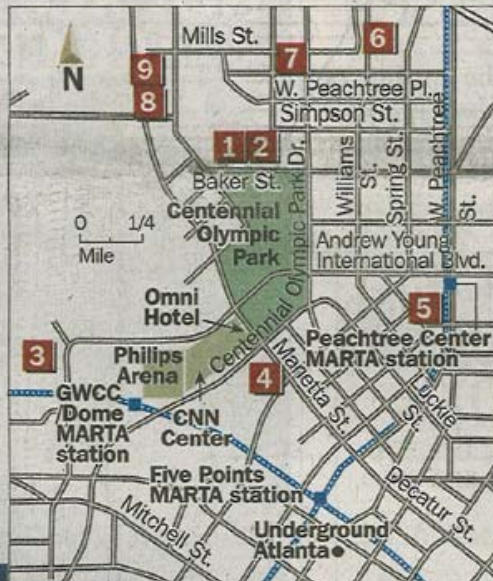
2 New World of Coca-Cola

The soft drink company's museum, costing at least \$96.4 million, will be adjacent to the Georgia Aquarium. Atlanta is to provide up to \$8 million from a future bond sale to help pay for a parking deck, landscaping and site preparation.



3 Georgia Dome

Falcons owner Arthur Blank proposes investing up to \$150 million to add corporate suites, install more seats in the pricey club level and build a retail destination that may be open year-round.



5 Winecoff Hotel

The historic hotel would be restored as a 127-room hotel with a cafe, dining room and lounge. The project is to cost \$20.5 million, and Atlanta is to provide up to \$1.2 million for environmental clean-up, landscaping and upgrades to windows and all facades.



4 Glenn Boutique Hotel

The 1920s-era office building is to be refurbished into a \$20.9 million facility offering 110 hotel rooms with a restaurant and rooftop terrace. Atlanta is to provide up to \$1.4 million from a future bond sale for pavement and landscaping.



6 Allen Plaza – A planned \$300 million commercial and residential center.

7 Ivan Allen Jr. Boulevard – The new road is to be a pedestrian-friendly connection between Atlanta's hotel district and the Georgia Aquarium. It will end near the Georgia World Congress Center.

8 Marietta Place – A commercial complex with up to nine shops and restaurants.

9 Park Pavilion – A new hotel with 125 suites, two restaurants, 10 shops and 515 parking spaces.