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Boosting the heart of Monroe

BY CAROLYN STEEVES

MONROE — In the age of malls, interstates and online shopping, certain groups are dedicated to keeping often-struggling downtown areas alive. One such group is Downtown Monroe, which is charged with helping current businesses and bringing new businesses to downtown Monroe.

"A strong downtown is really representative of the city and its people," said Brian Borne, director of Downtown Monroe.

"Whenever a town tries to recruit industry or professionals, all of those people looking at your town want to see your downtown. A vibrant downtown is a sign of a healthy, quality community so all of your recruiters and people being recruited take a look at it."

Borne became the director of Downtown Monroe in June, prior to that he was the

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director of Downtown Gastonia.

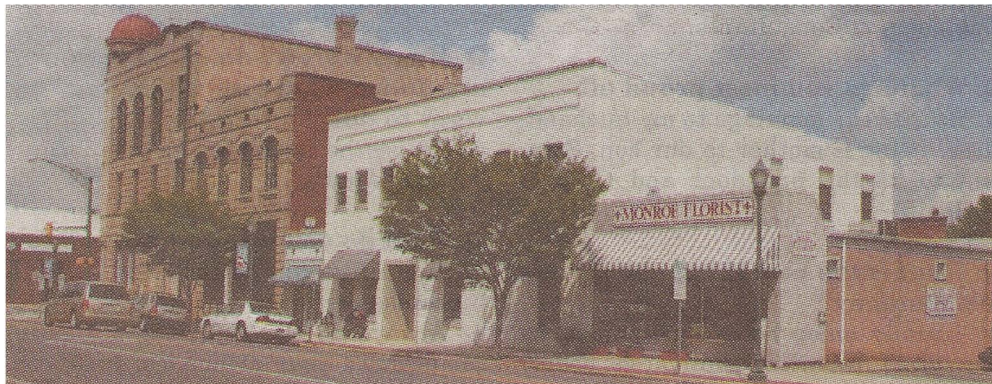
He noted that downtown Monroe has, in his opinion, a "head start." "We just have to build on that and work to bring more and work to bring people living down here," he added.

One of Borne's top priorities is bringing residential development to the downtown area.

"We need to have a number of people living down here in the upper floors," he said. He noted that the residential component brings a "vibrancy and life downtown 24 hours a day."

One challenge for downtown Monroe is competition from the mall and "big box" stores in the area. Jim Carpenter, the president of the Union County Chamber of Commerce said that until about the 1970s downtown was the retail hub of Monroe and Union County. When the mall was built the major retailers left and it went through a transition.

"It usurped major retail function as happened in all towns," Carpenter said. "So downtown Monroe has had to develop its own uniqueness." He explained that they had to develop specialty shops, restaurants and venues that attract visitors.



Mecklenburg Times photo by Carolyn Steeves

STREET VIEW: Monroe Florist and Gifts is among the storefronts lining North Hayne Street.

Borne explained that if businesses "provide exceptional service, quality and a product that's not available in those stores" people will continue to come downtown. He said he encourages businesses to do just that.

Carpenter noted that Downtown Monroe has not only revitalized the downtown area but also stimulated the Union County economy. "They certainly bring in tourism dollars because they have a number of events that are great for everyone," he explained.

Borne is optimistic about the future of downtown Monroe. "Monroe's on its way back," he said. "If you look at the bigger picture with the economy and gas prices ... downtown being as dense as it is and being walk able, I think people may find more appeal in living in a more urban setting where they don't have to hop in their car to do everything."

Carpenter noted that Monroe has a historic district that circles the downtown area. There are old homes being restored their and people are moving back in.

"I think you'll see a resurgence of people living downtown in the upper floors," Borne said.

Coming up with a plan

A Monroe Downtown Master Plan was released in February. The plan maps out a future for the downtown area, including recommendations for condo developments, a recommendation to replace the existing trees with larger canopy trees, a roundabout and other plans for residential commercial and the viability of the downtown area. The stated goal of the plan is to "return Monroe to its position as the focal point of commerce, arts and employment in

Union County."

The document charts a vision for the next 20 years, but some elements can be completed in up to three years, Assistant City Manager Wayne Herron told **The Times**. A lot of the elements depend on funding, he said.

Herron was excited by how much interest the community took in creating the master plan. "In Monroe we've done a lot of plans. You feel lucky if you get 20 or 30 people to come out for any given plan," he said. According to Herron, there were usually 75-100 people at the meetings that dealt with creating the master plan. "Citizens continue to come out over issues ... they really want downtown to succeed."

Herron said Monroe had never had a downtown plan before. About a year ago a group of commercial developers visited and Herron said they were asked, "Why are we not moving forward?" They were asked why the city hasn't seen the progress that downtown areas in Davidson, Cornelius or Gastonia are seeing.

"What we were told is, 'You don't have a plan. You don't have a vision' and developers don't want to risk their money if there's no vision," Herron recalled. He said the master plan has already reaped a few rewards, they now have developers who are interested in the area and developing partnerships.

"It's been a great tool to add to our toolbox."

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