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## **Centennial Forum: Take a lesson, Sanford – Promote your unique assets**

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by Alec Then, Special to the Herald

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I recently had the pleasure to visit two very interesting old towns in the Carolinas: Asheville, N.C., and Greenville, S.C. Maybe Sanford can learn something from them.

My trip was due largely because of the affordable and convenient flights out of Orlando Sanford International Airport. Another large reason for the trip was because my wife is terrific at planning these things; I provided the remaining 2 percent by showing up.

Despite the short time I spent in these towns, I left each with a good and lasting sense of their identity.

Despite Asheville's recent 'storm of the century' and before the snow made driving impossible, we were able to go into the old part of town and visit many shops and a few restaurants. The variety is so great, it's a treat for all the senses. Such an eclectic mix of crafts, art, services and other merchandise and food from all corners of this world.

We saw very few chain/franchise stores and each business was so unique and made even more so being housed in old, historic buildings, each with its own architectural charms. The mix itself was truly unique to this town. This area has an identity that cannot be mistaken for anywhere else.

After literally digging out of the snow, we drove to Greenville. This town also has a historic district in the old downtown core. Again, we found a great mix of one-of-a-kind stores with some more recognizable merchants. We noticed more new infill development among the historic structures than in Asheville.

Most were clearly new buildings yet architecturally interesting, and offered variety without making the old structures look out of place on their own turf. The things that I thought made the 'identity' of this area distinct (beyond the local businesses) were the geography and the many instances of adaptive re-use of the historic structures.

The old area is built on and around the Reedy River; the river and its falls are an invaluable asset to the community. The land around the falls is a beautiful multipurpose park with gardens, paths, an exceptional suspended bridge and even a couple performance areas for events. A pedestrian path extends upriver from the falls and is home to park facilities and a number of shops. It makes for a great afternoon or evening stroll.

Of the older buildings that were in use I was quite impressed by the creative way in which several had been altered to suit a whole new generation of use. I consider myself a preservationist but I love to see creativity applied to adaptive

reuse.

When you actually spend time walking the streets of towns you visit, you begin to feel the personality formed from the architecture, restaurants, public art, mix of shops, unique art, craft and merchandise offerings. These all combine and become a character in your mind, a mental flavor that will stay in your memory as the identity for that place.

Many cities have recognizable chain stores, malls, franchises, etc. – sometimes in the older parts of town but more commonly in newly developed areas outside the downtown. Whatever the case, these businesses serve an important need, but are not what you remember of the town since you've seen them everywhere.

The point is: Each town is memorable only if it is somehow unique, that it has it's own sense of identity distinct from other places.

Our town, Sanford, has all the necessary assets to become a unique, memorable place distinct from other communities in Florida.

When residents and visitors think of Sanford, they generally think of the images of the waterfront and the historic downtown. Years ago, Miami architect Andres Duane referred to the Sanford historic district as a jewel.

There are now some new icons in some residents' and visitors' minds that now are synonymous with downtown Sanford: good restaurants, bars and even a rooster. When I first moved here, other than the wonderful old buildings and the lakefront, the city's icons were antique shops and a few stalwart stores: Knight's Shoes and Betty Anne's Hair Styling come to mind. I'm sorry Knight's is no more, but Betty Anne's is still going strong.

During the past few years we've seen the waterfront and downtown get some much-needed attention in the form of improvements that are both functionally necessary (replacing crumbling seawall, improving drainage and infrastructure on 1st Street) and, thankfully, aesthetically pleasing and welcoming to pedestrians. Both projects may have had their critics but for the most part these are good and welcome improvements.

There are still those who complain that too much emphasis is put on improving the old downtown but I hope they are few and that most citizens will realize that nurturing the downtown to encourage a lively, energetic retail/office and residential area is important to the success of the entire city.

I look forward to the coming improvements to Sanford Avenue, courtesy of the expanded downtown Community Redevelopment Agency, and the continued building improvements from the property owner's themselves.

Our look is changing!

For this new year, I also hope Sanford resumes it's search for a logo, an identifying image and slogan.

While some may think it a waste of time, these things are important in marketing, and make no mistake, we do need to market our town if we want any kind of growth and continuing economic success for businesses and residents.

We were once a member of a national program that has had numerous and huge successes in towns such as ours all over the country. The program is called Mainstreet and is overseen by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Greenville is an award-winning Mainstreet city, and we should be participating program members again. I hope that a cooperative and positive spirit can be rekindled downtown among all parties concerned, to best find a plan to encourage the repairs, maintenance and redevelopment of our jewel.

There are some innovative and clever people right here who can contribute much to formulating such a plan.

To that effect, I encourage the city staff, elected officials, downtown business/building owners and citizens to embrace and advance Sanford's identity that is found on along Lake Monroe's shoreline and in the old downtown.

Pride must be taken by those who own the land and structures that comprise the downtown. They should accept the responsibility that comes with owning properties that truly define a community.

With proper repairs and maintenance of the properties, the owners can fully profit from their assets, as will the city as a whole.

Some buildings are just buildings.

But our historic structures make up the city's face, and combined with the businesses therein, comprise Sanford's identity.

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