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The Hot Springs Revival

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By Rob Moritz | Photography by David Yerby

Like the mythological phoenix obtaining new life by rising from its ashes, Hot Springs is reinventing itself in the aftermath of the 2014 fire that heavily damaged the historic Majestic Hotel.

“My view of the Majestic is that it’s a once-in-a-generation transformative project and opportunity,” says City Manager David Frasher, adding that city officials and the public will begin discussing what should be built at the now-vacant intersection of Park and Central Avenues in the next few months.

“I think, if done correctly, that it could generate thousands of thousands... of new visitors to the community, net new visitors and give the community a broader appeal,” says Frasher. “Rather than simply being a regional-draw city, I think we can reach a much broader market and become a national draw.”

Already internationally famous for its thermal waters, Hot Springs National Park and historic Bathhouse Row, boating and fishing lakes, hiking trails and Oaklawn Park racetrack and gambling facility, Hot Springs is widening its net as it tries to take advantage of an economic surge.



Hot Springs is home to the Arkansas Derby, one of the country's most exciting horse-racing events.

"We're known to be a retirement community, but we're not a one-trick-pony in that area," asserts Frasher. "We're also focused on attracting millennials. We want to continue to be a retirement mecca for the region, but we are heavily investing in the future as well."

As of mid-January, 85 new businesses have opened in the downtown area since the Majestic fire, says Cole McCaskill, vice president of the economic development for the Hot Springs Metro Partnership. Seventy of the historic/commercial buildings have sold, for a total sales value of more than \$50 million, and more than \$60 million has been invested into those properties and new businesses downtown, according to McCaskill.

"The fire woke the city up, woke the people up and all of a sudden we've been on a roll ever since," says Steve Arrison, CEO of Visit Hot Springs.

Rather than dwell on the loss, many took the opportunity to reassess the city's historic downtown buildings and try to save them from a similar fate, notes Frasher.



Hot Springs is home to the World's Shortest St. Patrick's Day Parade, which is scheduled this year for March 17.

In late 2014, the Hot Springs Board of Directors created the Thermal Basin Fire District Code to protect its historic structures. The codes included requiring buildings in the Central Avenue Historic District to install nationally recognized fire-suppression systems, which forced the owners of the properties to upgrade or sell.

The thermal district “stimulated the reinvestment in our downtown,” says Frasher. “It provided a set of tools and incentives by which people would either want to fix up properties or sell them to those who would.”

Because of delays in getting the rubble and debris from the Majestic fire cleaned up, the property was condemned and it was purchased by the city in 2015 for \$600,000. In 2016, what remained of the hotel was demolished at a cost of more than \$1 million to the city, says Frasher.

In December, the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality gave the property high marks and said it could be developed to the highest levels of residential unrestricted, says Frasher.

The city “took a chance on an investment and it has paid off, because now that the property has a clearance, it is worth dramatically more than what the city paid for it,” Frasher said.

The “investment renaissance” now underway in Hot Springs is being fueled by the city’s authenticity and originality, says Frasher. “Our focus is on quality of life and there is something here for everybody.”



At SQZBX Brewery, visitors can order a cold beer or even a delicious, fresh pizza.

HOTELS AND CRAFT BREWS

Since 2014, several hotels have opened and others are being rehabilitated. There has also been a boom in craft breweries.

The Waters, a boutique hotel at 340 Central Ave., opened last year and includes 62 rooms and a restaurant, says Arrison. A \$10 million renovation of the Austin Hotel at 305 Malvern Ave. was recently completed, and it has reopened as the Hotel Hot Springs & Spa.

City Mayor Pat McCabe says he has leased the Hale Bathhouse at 329 Central Ave. and plans to refurbish it into a seven-room and two-suite boutique hotel and restaurant. McCabe and his wife, Ellen, are investing more than \$1 million into the project.

Two hotels south of Highway 270 on Central Avenue – Courtyard by Marriott-Hot Springs and the Holiday Inn Express & Suites-Hot Springs – have opened in the past two years, says Arrison, and work continues on a Home2 Suites by Hilton, which is scheduled to open this year near Lake Hamilton Island Marina.



The brewmasters at Bubba Brew's in Hot Springs are passionate about their craft beer.

Refreshing regional beers and microbrews have become popular in Hot Springs in recent years, and they are promoted, along with those in other Arkansas cities, on the state Department of Parks & Tourism's web page.

"People are investing in these craft breweries, they are largely a younger demographic than our retirement community, but they're every bit as important to our future," says Frasher. "This is a growing phenomenon, and we're trying to make the most of it."

One in particular, Superior Bathhouse Brewery and Distillery, which is located in the Superior Bathhouse, is the only craft brewery in the city that uses natural Hot Springs water to make its beer, says Arrison.

TRAFFIC PROJECTS

Downtown traffic congestion is being addressed by two major projects, according to officials.

A nearly 18-mile project to widen U.S. 70 from Hot Springs to Interstate 30 at Benton from three to five lanes should be completed by the summer, says Danny Straessle, public information officer for the Arkansas Department of Transportation. The \$78.5 million project is funded through a temporary half-cent increase to the sales tax, approved by Arkansas voters in 2012.

Also, in 2016 Garland County voters approved a five-eighths-cent sales tax increase to fund a \$54 million bond issue to help extend the Martin Luther King Jr. Expressway in Hot Springs between U.S. 70 east of the city to near Fountain Lake.

That project will divert some traffic out of downtown and "some of the pressure will be relieved on pedestrians and others who are downtown for different purposes," says Frasher.



For biking enthusiasts, Hot Springs has plenty to offer, including world-class bike trail systems that stretch for miles. Photo by Jeremy Rodgers.

BIKING AND OAKLAWN

And if you're a fan of mountain biking, Arrison says a "world-class" bike trail system, totaling about 45 miles, is planned for the city-owned Northwoods area, about five minutes north of downtown.

The first phase of the project, 10 to 15 miles, is currently under construction and expected to open as early as this summer.

Visit Hot Springs has partnered with the Walton Family Foundation to finance the project, which will cost more than \$1 million, says Arrison. The project is being built by the International Mountain Biking Association's Trail Solutions project.

When the mountain bike trails open, bikers will be able to stay at downtown hotels or park downtown and ride their bikes a short distance to the trailhead.

Plans are also being developed to create a trail for walkers and bikers from Hot Springs to Little Rock.

Oaklawn Park, which opened its racing season Jan. 12, is a nationally known thoroughbred horse racing track that has been a major part of the region's economy for more than a century. "With the purses where they are, they're bringing in the best horses in the world," says Arrison.

The December death of 81-year-old Charles Cella, longtime president and chairman of the board of the Oaklawn Jockey Club in Hot Springs, will not affect the park's success or its relationship with the city, according to several city officials. The Cella family has owned the park since 1904 and Cella's son, Louis, has taken over as president.

Another popular attraction in Hot Springs is the 15th annual World's Shortest St. Patrick's Day Parade, which is set for March 17. Joey Fatone of *NSYNC will serve as grand marshal. Jon Heder, who had the leading role in the movie Napoleon Dynamite, will serve as official starter.