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Local News - Sunday, March 12, 2006

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Hall visits Greenville for clearer vision

By **HARRIS BLACKWOOD**

The Times

When Russell Stall was a teenager, downtown Greenville was not a good place to be.

"We used to cruise Main Street," said Stall, 46. "You never admitted to your mom and dad that you drove down Main Street. It wasn't a good place to be."

Main Street in the South Carolina city is now a tree-lined boulevard of eclectic shops and sidewalk cafes. The buildings, mostly two- and three-story brick structures, have seen their upper floors converted into in-town lofts.

On Friday afternoon, many of the eateries are filled with young adults who have returned to the heart of this city, which was once dominated by the textile industry.

"This is a very different Greenville than the one I grew up in," Stall said.

"It's very vibrant and is a place that people brag about. We're very proud of our downtown and that usually is one of the first places we bring out-of-town guests."

The heart of downtown now includes two luxury hotels, a performing arts center and a park which surrounds a waterfall on the Reedy River at the edge of the city's central district.

In January, Stall was named to head Greenville Forward, a nonprofit organization



Harris Blackwood The Times

Kit Dunlap, president of the Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce, and chairman-elect Jimmy Adams, walk across a suspension bridge Friday in a park in downtown Greenville, S.C. The park is one of several projects that resulted from the city's Vision 2025 program, which began in 2002. Chamber members took a tour of the city Friday and Saturday to learn more about how to implement Gainesville's Vision 2030 program.



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that is implementing the community's Vision 2025 program, which began in 2002.

On Friday, 16 leaders of Vision 2030, the community design program in Hall County, journeyed to Greenville to see the results of the community's two vision programs, including the first one that began in 1987.

While the population is significantly larger, Greenville, like Gainesville, is a city surrounded by a much larger residential community in surrounding Greenville County.

Cotton once was king in Greenville. Large cotton mills, which now are being converted into residential lofts, were the city's economic engines.

The city also was home to legendary baseball player "Shoeless" Joe Jackson, as well as the minor league baseball team known as the "Spinners," a reference to the spinning process that turns cotton into fabric.

Over the past two decades, the textile business in Greenville has nearly dried up. An automotive assembly plant, built by BMW in nearby Spartanburg County and opened in 1994, has become the crown jewel of the region's business community.

The auto plant also has resulted in the creation of the International Center for Automotive Research, an initiative that brings together BMS, IBM, Microsoft and Michelin in a research arm of Clemson University.

John Vardeman, an advertising executive and chairman of the Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce, was among those on the tour and said that the accomplishments of Greenville can help the Vision 2030 program in Hall County.

"It's inspiring to come to a place like Greenville and see what really can be done," Vardeman said.

Denise Deal, executive director of Vision 2030, said that the trip was an eye-opener.

"Perhaps we need to dream even bigger," said Deal, after touring the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities, a year-round residential magnet school for high school juniors and seniors from throughout the state.

But Stall said that while Greenville has made great accomplishments, he has much work ahead to continue to educate the public about the vision process.

"We're now trying to convince people that Greenville does have a plan, it is looking to the future, and we're not just letting things happen," said Stall, who said that most residents have heard about the planning process but may not know details.

"I'm fairly convinced that if I can sit down with someone and explain what the vision is and how it works and what Greenville Forward is, I can convert them," he said.

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