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# Macon tries to learn from Greenville, S.C., example

By CHRIS HORNE - chorne@macon.com

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Greenville, S.C., was once a dying textile mill town. But all that has changed.

Driven by a cooperative public-private effort, the city's downtown daytime population is now 200,000 with a nighttime population that's even higher, said Russell Stall, executive director of Greenville Forward, an organization that oversees a community initiative called Vision 2025, which has set goals for the city to achieve by 2025.

Greenville boasts a single-A baseball team in a downtown stadium, an active performing arts center and the \$12 million Falls Park, which includes a pedestrian bridge overlooking waterfalls.

Macon Mayor Robert Reichert wants Macon to emulate a lot of Greenville's success.

Thursday night, a group of Macon's community, business and elected leaders filled the Armory Ballroom in downtown Macon to hear a presentation by Stall.

"Macon still looks like Greenville did 20 years ago," Reichert said.

"I'm just trying to start the dialogue, trying to get the conversation going."

The first lesson, officials said, is that large-scale revitalization takes a long time.

"I was told there used to only be four things you could buy in downtown Greenville: wigs, cheap shoes, sex and drugs," said Danny Gibson, vice president of Macon Power, which has had a branch in Greenville for the past 11 years.

"The first thing you'll hear (officials) say is that Greenville is an overnight success that was 25 years in the making."

Gibson said he's been amazed at the progress he's witnessed in that time.

He's been so impressed that he gathered a group of influential Maconites to visit Greenville. A couple years after taking that first group, Gibson began bending the ear of the newly elected Reichert.

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Late last year, the mayor, Gibson and a new group visited Greenville. Everyone left impressed.

"My message is 'Look, Macon, if they can do it, we can do it,'" Gibson said.

"I wanted to learn what they were doing to be so successful."

The second lesson, Gibson said, is to assemble a group that's dedicated, passionate and has vision.

Stall had to come to it the hard way. A Greenville native, he said he didn't think he would ever live in Greenville after graduating from high school.

"It was not progressive," he said. "It not somewhere a young person wanted to be."

He and his family moved back to Greenville 12 years ago.

At the time, he said, there were only five restaurants downtown. Now he estimates there are more than 90.

There wasn't just one thing that made it all happen, he said, but the culmination of many small successes. The more the city succeeded, the more the community bought in.

Pat Topping, vice president of the Macon-Bibb County Economic Development Commission, went with Gibson and Reichert on that second trip.

"We just have to do this a little at a time," he said.

No matter what, officials said, revitalizing Macon will take a dedicated group.

"Every city needs someone thinking about what the city can be," Stall said.

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**ldf** wrote on 02/19/2010 01:15:19 PM:

Macon will never learn hell they had the braves but refused to improve Luther Williams Field (which they could have had a whole new park from the Olympics) instead the powers to be would rather have a new courthouse and raise revenues from taxpayers while harrassing people with tickets who do attend functions downtown. They tried selling sex with allowing all the massage parlors didn't that give us a black eye. Yes there are many examples like Greenville but will we ever so much as dare to improve. If so lets see the mayor and city council step down eliminating their positions and yeild to the county. One govt would be better but know they are hell bent on consolidating and keeping all their jobs. NO MACON WILL NEVER BE GREENVILLE!

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**pleasantburg** wrote on 02/19/2010 12:03:03 PM:

I am originally from Greenville. Macon does remind me of Greenville in the 1970's. The big difference between 1970's Greenville and present day Macon is the city government. Macon's City Council is not progressive; most of the 15 members are more concerned about petty turf battles and egos than about making the city more prosperous. Also, Greenville does not go so easy on criminals and does not fuel the entitlement mentality of the lazy folks who would rather mooch off of society than work.

Except for those little details, the cities are quite similar. Macon could do what Greenville did (and continues to do), but only if the voters make some changes in how they mark their ballots.

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**tomkat1** wrote on 02/19/2010 12:01:29 PM:



The Macon leaders are mentally challenged and can not lear.

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**carpepm** wrote on 02/19/2010 11:47:50 AM:

Our elected leaders are 25 years too late. The people that went don't know how to think out of the box. The Chamber of Commerce....puhleeeeeze, give me a break...All they want to do is bring in polluting factories so they can pump out their chests and say, "they've brought jobs to Macon." They wouldn't know a quality of life enhancement if it hit them in the face. Remember what Einstein said, "If you continue to do the same things, over and over, and expect....."

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**JustinLamont** wrote on 02/19/2010 11:11:46 AM:

You are so right ddie. I visited Greenville for the first time six years ago and was extremely impressed. We could learn a lot, but the "traditional" way of thinking in this community MUST change if we are going to break out of the doldrums.

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**ddie** wrote on 02/19/2010 10:34:12 AM:

Macon has many assets: Mercer University, Macon State College, Wesleyan College, Georgia College and State University, Graduate Center; a public school system with a renewed and renewing plant and a public focused on improving its academic performance; an excellent location with great access: two interstate highways, close access to the almost completed Fall Line Freeway. Two airports, one within 10 minutes of downtown, and quicker access to the Hartsfield Jackson than North Atlanta; Unbelievable railroad (freight) access; A strong medical community including a medical college; a strong arts community; a strong history and historic districts; a strong religious community; local access to major banking and finance; strong neighborhood; an outstanding, well managed water and sewer system; an active, aggressive, Chamber of Commerce and downtown promotion group; a local government that is evolving into strong effective leadership; strong surrounding communities; the list goes on.

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**midnightrider** wrote on 02/19/2010 08:48:49 AM:

@TheHistorian  
Or at least young blood.

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**TheHistorian** wrote on 02/19/2010 07:39:35 AM:

Greenville's "dedicated group" came mostly from outside the area--in fact, upstate SC was one of the first areas in the South to attract significant foreign capital, when Hoechst Fibers, Michelin, and other European companies arrived back in the 1960s.

Folks here are so caught up in stereotypes and negative thinking that they don't realize the city's potential. Macon needs fresh blood and outside money to make it happen.

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