



(The Business Journal, Sept.28, 1998)

Is downtown Greensboro on a roll?

By JUSTIN CATANO

GREENSBORO -- In 1985, a couple of frat brothers from Roanoke College saw life in a place that looked like death: downtown Roanoke. Yet they pushed ahead with their business plan. They now see the same thing in downtown Greensboro -- and once again, the duo appears ready to tempt fate.

"We're definitely interested in Greensboro," said Al Pollard, co-founder and co-owner of Corned Beef & Co., a popular restaurant and entertainment center now located only in Roanoke.

"We've been to Greensboro a couple of times to look around. We really like the Hamburger Square area (on South Elm Street). We'll be back in the next week or so to look around some more."

Pollard and his partner, Roger Neel Jr., are looking for 20,000 square feet -- a space even bigger than the popular Corned Beef & Co. in Roanoke -- for what Pollard calls "a major entertainment center." The startup investment could top \$1 million.

Fueled perhaps more by confidence than common sense in Roanoke 14 years ago, Pollard and Neel invested in a concept restaurant that promoted deli-style food and live entertainment -- music, billiards, interactive video. At the time, only two other restaurants were open downtown.

"We came in with the attitude that we were going to create the energy to make things happen," Pollard said.

The buddies did just that and are given a share of the credit for sparking Roanoke's much-praised downtown renaissance. In fact, Greensboro's downtown advocates have studied Roanoke like a road map in recent years for its own path to revitalization.

"If they take this concept to Greensboro, it will be an out-of-the-park, grand slam home run," says Jimmy Black, chairman of Downtown Greensboro, Inc., who met recently with Pollard and Neel. "It's a novel idea, it's a good company, and it's timely."

In fact, it appears that bit by bit, enough progress is being made in downtown Greensboro to qualify as momentum. That has been impossible to say in the past decade. But consider:

? Johnston Properties is planning a five-story office building on Greene Street across from the Hilton. It is the first spec office building to go up downtown in eight years. SouthTrust Bank is relocating from Green Valley Office Park to be the anchor tenant.

? After nearly a decade of haggling and planning, the new central Greensboro Library on Church Street will open in November, with the Children's Museum set to open right across the street next year.

? Greensboro City Council recently granted zoning approval for Jam Entertainment to open a new upscale jazz club on the 100 block of South Elm Street in the Old Center Theater.

"It really does seem like things are beginning to move in the right direction," said Black, who recently lobbied City Council to consider building a new minor league ballpark downtown on Church Street.

Pollard won't say which building has caught his interest during his visits to Greensboro, but he wants to be near what little activity now exists on South Elm: the Paisley Pineapple, Ritchy's Uptown Restaurant & Bar and the apartments at Hamburger Square.

"What we like about that particular area is that we see downtown living," Pollard said. "And the downtown offices give you an automatic lunch business. That kind of thing then builds your nighttime business."

Like Roanoke, a Greensboro Corned Beef & Co. would include food, billiards, shuffleboard, and live music.

"They've been a major player in the revitalization of Roanoke's downtown," said Richard Beard, the Greensboro chamber's project manager for economic development, who held a similar position in Roanoke. "It would be a big asset for our downtown efforts as well."

Pollard says he and his partner have also visited Winston-Salem in recent weeks and like what they see there, too. They've met with Jack Steelman, who heads the Winston-Salem Downtown Development Corp.

Asked if he can launch new venue in both Triad cities, Pollard says, "It all depends on what things cost. Right now, we're trying to make some decisions so we can get started somewhere by the first of the year."

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