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MR. DOWNTOWN:

Jimmy Black Has His Work Cut Out for Him, but the Chief Flag-Waver for Rejuvenating Downtown Greensboro is Determined to Make a Dent

By MARIA C. JOHNSON

Once upon a time, before downtowns were center cities, there was a boy named Jimmy Black. He was a cute little guy - with a pudgy face and pale green eyes and hair clipped down to bristles - and he loved where he lived, which was on the apron string of Atlanta.

Now Atlanta was a big place, even 40 years ago, but little Jimmy wasn't scared at all. He jumped on his candy-apple red bicycle, which he had customized with long handlebars, and zipped into the heart of town almost every day. Everything he needed was there. Theaters where he could watch Ben Hur and Elvis shake things up. An Army surplus store with treasures such as pocketknives and canteens and Civil War Minie balls. Perkins' drugstore, where they drew the sweetest cherry Cokes, you'd ever want to blow bubbles in.

Little Jimmy loved going downtown, and not just because it was convenient. He loved it because of its energy, the hum of people, ideas and action all pressed together.

Now, half a lifetime later, Black is chairman and chief cheerleader for Downtown Greensboro Inc., a private, nonprofit ensemble that's trying to inject the same kind of buzz into Greensboro's downtown, an area that is showing sprigs of new growth after a prolonged wilt that began in the 1940s, when retail businesses started creeping to the suburbs.

Black, the only chairman DGI has had since it was born three years ago, jabs a finger into the air and traces the fortunes of downtown Greensboro. ``It has been up here,' he says, starting high and dropping low before rounding out a valley and starting back up. ``It's about third of the way up.'

He and his supporters point to small outbreaks of momentum downtown: the new main public library and children's museum in what some people call the cultural district; the slated relocation of popular Liberty Oak restaurant to Washington and Elm streets; plans for Triad Stage, a new professional theater, on Elm Street; and drawings for a fast-food court on Greene Street and a new YMCA on the western edge of downtown.

Black and DGI can't claim huge laurels for landing any of the projects, but they did wax the runners for a few, such as Liberty Oak. DGI President Ray Gibbs, whose job title might as well be downtown interference runner, offered his services to downtown property owner Beverly Morcos as she negotiated with Liberty Oak.

Gibbs told restaurant owner Walter Fancourt that he would ask city officials about getting more on-street parking and lighter in an adjacent parking deck. Gibbs, a licensed landscape architect who has worked 15 years in downtown development, also brought a set of blueprints to show possible ways of using the space. More than anything, Fancourt says, Gibbs made him feel welcome, as opposed to some property managers who made him feel ``like a commodity.'

``It's like somebody's on your side,' Fancourt says.

DGI is not the first group to try to breathe more life into downtown Greensboro, an area where crumbling, hollowed-eyed buildings still cast long shadows on healthy ones. One group after another has drafted, and shelved, plans to shape up the area.

This time, Black hopes, things might be a little different.

For one, downtown has DGI, the first organization with a budget and a full-time staffer - Gibbs - devoted to recharging downtown, a one-square mile area loosely fenced by Fisher Avenue on the north, the Norfolk Southern railroad tracks on the east, Lee Street on the south and Edgeworth Street on the west.

And DGI has a plan. Last year, the group issued a report calling for a mix of retail, entertainment, and residential development in an open, clean, easy-to-maneuver downtown. Those are hardly fighting words but getting there won't be easy.

Black knows that. Ask what it will take to get the kind of downtown DGI envisions, and Black spares you the hat-and-cane routine. He snatches the owlish wire frames from his golf-reddened face, twirls his specs by one temple so hard you think he might just take off like a helicopter, and delivers his answer in a soft Georgia growl:

``Ain't nothin' but money.'

Black says an infusion of money, both public and private, is crucial to a livelier downtown. City officials have bought in to the idea. This year's city budget includes \$750,000- much more than ever - to be spent on downtown and surrounding areas, most of it yet to be earmarked.

Finally, on their side, Black and DGI might have the luck of being in the right place at the right time, and not just because things are happening in Greensboro. Other cities smaller and larger have rehabilitated their downtowns, showing it can be done.

``That takes a lot of the mystery out of it,' he says.

But the road to a thriving downtown is still pocked with ruts, among them high property costs, multiple land owners who make it a challenge to assemble a large chunk of land, and the perception of many in the suburbs that downtown is dead, unsafe or simply irrelevant unless you work there.

``There's just a tremendous apathy,' says Keith Debbage, an associate professor of urban economic geography at UNCG. Though Debbage believes downtowns are critical to cities, ``Americans just don't view downtown as a part of their daily lives,' he says.

Black, the third name in the real estate troika of Weaver, Grubar & Black, would like to change that. Why? Not, he says with his jaw tightening, because he is a handmaiden of his brokerage firm, a theory that has irked him before. Though his office is only a plate glass window away from South Elm Street, 99 percent of his income comes from outside downtown, he says. Who found the Green Valley Road building for Charles Schwab & Co., the latest white-collar business to leave downtown?

``Junior here.'

He's interested in downtown, he says, because great cities have great downtowns. Because it is a natural place for people from all over the city to meet and mingle. Because a kicking downtown might entice more young people to stay here. And because it galls him that cities such as Wilmington and Columbus, Ga., have mustered the money and the will to juice up their downtowns on a scale that Greensboro hasn't.

``You're damn right there's pride,' he says.

It might not be the first thing you see when you drive or fly in, but downtown is the gateway for your thoughts about a place, Black says.

``It's your front door, and down through the ages, people have wanted their front door to look good.'

Take a look at Black's home in Irving Park, and you see what he means. The door to his columned Colonial home is nothing special by itself. But the long front walk is lined with alternating bunches of red and white impatiens that Black, his wife and their two teenage daughters planted in the spring. It's the biggest display of color in his neighborhood.

When you get to where Jimmy Black lives, you know it.

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A few words about the tutu.

The idea came out of Black's mouth as many of his ideas do - before he knew it. The place was a board meeting of the United Arts Council of Greensboro. Black was president of the board, a term he has since fulfilled.

The discussion that night was the annual fund-raising goal: \$1.05 million, a record high. If y'all raise a million dollars by the end of the year, Black said, I'll dance down South Elm Street in a tutu.

``I was just popping off,' he says.

Memo: Never pop off in front of art people. One board member said he could get an extra-large tutu made, no problem. The council's marketing director loved the idea. And now Black is seriously thinking about what color his tutu might be.

``The closer they get to the goal, the more I think the idea stinks,' he says dryly.

This is what people mean when they say Black has the right personality to be chairman of DGI. A lover of the grand gesture - and a man who lives in fear that another man will wear the same necktie to a cocktail party - he has the ability to think out of the box, the confidence to say what he's thinking and the energy to make it happen, even when time seems to have run out.

Black, 48, would blame this on ADD, Attention Deficit Disorder, which a doctor diagnosed last year. He takes Ritalin now, and it helps, he says, but it's not a cure. His mind still flies away, like it has ever since he was a schoolboy, thinking of everything but the test in front of him.

He talks about his ADD a lot, he says, because people who deal with him need to know that it can make for a bothersome combination: He's a procrastinator himself, but he's impatient when others don't deliver. He also can be ``impulsive in word.'

But lots of creative people have ADD, he says, and once he gets focused, he can use his creativity to his advantage. Ed Kitchen, Greensboro city manager and a DGI board member, agrees.

``I think he's a great combination of a dreamer and a practical implementer, and that's what you need in this kind of role.'

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The wind is working against Black.

He holds a sheaf of artist renderings ripped from development magazines. They are plans for other downtowns, and they're fanning Black's flames as he walks the streets of downtown Greensboro, explaining what could be.

``Look at this,' he says, fighting to keep the picture from flipping over. He stands on Elm Street and defines the block across the street with a sweep of his hand.

Imagine this picture right there. A few storefronts preserved for shops and restaurants, with layers of offices and apartments as a backdrop. Nice, huh? We need more people living downtown to make it - how do the kids say it? - 24-7. The geography is right. Underground parking would go on this end.

He strides north, past the Jefferson-Pilot Corp. building to the old Wachovia building, which Jeff-Pilot owns. The insurance company has big plans for that building, he says. Plans that would create office space for other companies. And there could be a park on the block across the street - the block that used to hold Stocks & Buns restaurant. Visually, that would bring the Cultural Center into the middle of downtown. Several things will have to happen before this jells, but wouldn't that be great?

Now, step this way. See this parking deck at Friendly and Davie? Old. Going to need an overhaul soon. What if something like Boston's fancy marketplace, Faneuil Hall, was there? This is just Jimmy Black talking, but wouldn't that be neat?

And the block across from that? What a place for a performing arts center.

What about War Memorial Auditorium and the Carolina Theatre?

Black sighs.

``I think we here in Greensboro get a little hung up on the past and are scared of the future.'

Black saw the tendency when he moved here in 1985 as an employee of an Atlanta developer, Cousins Properties. His first project was the Summit Green office building on Green Valley Road. Then he conceived the idea of the First Union tower in the North Elm business district, an area that sprouted the Renaissance Plaza and the newer Jefferson-Pilot building around the same time.

``I wanted to create a building that made an impression. There was nothing in Greensboro that made an indelible impression on me,' he says. ``I don't think the building succeeded, but I think the area succeeded.'

He saw more room for improvement downtown. Greensboro seemed a community of neighborhoods with nothing to revolve around. A solar system with a rather cold star at its center. Still, he and his wife, Bonnie, who had moved from Oklahoma City, loved living here. People were friendly, and business looked promising. Black dipped his hand into civic projects, including MetroMania, a 1990 celebration of a new parking deck and streetscaping downtown.

Mary Eubanks, a DGI board member, worked on that project with Black. In the newcomer, she saw the kind of person who could help to revive a depressed downtown.

``Jimmy came along at a time when Greensboro needed Jimmy,' she says. ``Downtown needed a spiritual leader, someone that said the things that needed to be said and spoke from strength. You know, it's all very well for those of us who'd been in the trenches to plead, but we didn't have the power, we didn't have the clout.'

Black's clout came from his business and from his personality.

``Jimmy's is a very macho kind of clout,' Eubanks says. ``And Greensboro is that kind of town. Somewhere else, gender wouldn't have mattered, but Greensboro was a town that needed a strongman who could go toe to toe, and Jimmy was the person.'

Black has clashed with a few downtown stakeholders in his three years as DGI chairman. He has raised the ire of some small business owners because he supports the idea of a business improvement district,

which would tax downtown property owners for money they could spend on things such as extra trash removal and extra police patrols.

His own partner, Mike Weaver, is adamantly opposed to a business improvement district, believing that it would create an extra burden on already-struggling area.

Another example: Jefferson-Pilot, one of Black's clients, is against DGI's proposal to make Greene Street, among others, a two-way street. Jefferson-Pilot says it would mess up its parking garage entrance.

Black says he has left the room when the subject has come up at Jefferson-Pilot.

``You have to accept the liability of potential conflicts,' he says.

It doesn't hurt Black's resolve that he comes from an old Atlanta family, says Eubanks, of the DGI board. Black's great-grandfather, Henry Grady, was publisher of the Atlanta Constitution newspaper. A Reconstructionist, Grady helped Atlanta get back on its feet after the Civil War.

``I think Jimmy very much admires that,' Eubanks says. ``And I think consciously or unconsciously this is an opportunity for Jimmy to be instrumental in the rebirth of a place.'

Black says doesn't feel genetically bound to erase one-way streets, but he has studied his great-grandfather's work in the last couple of years, and he admires his themes.

``He spent a lot of time talking about mending fences and bringing people together,' says Black, who briefly considered running for mayor of Greensboro two years ago. With three children to educate, he says, he has buried the idea of becoming a full-time politician, but he still likes the idea of influencing Greensboro.

``I'd be proud to be known as someone who found ways to bring our community together and made Greensboro a better place to live.'

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The work of DGI is hardly the stuff of prime-time drama:

Ray Gibbs goes to city officials to ask for more parking deck security and on-street parking for Liberty Oak restaurant.

He calls for an appointment to try to talk Corned Beef & Co., a Roanoke, Va., restaurant, into coming here.

Black helps the Imani Institute, Greensboro's first charter school, find space at Church Street and Friendly Avenue.

Gibbs calls state officials to see what real estate developer Robbie Perkins needs to do to get tax credits for renovating the Bales & Truitt building into an office.

Black lobbies city officials to 'power wash' the sidewalks and pass an ordinance to allow sidewalk dining.

The sidewalk ordinance, used by two or three restaurants in the last year, has helped, says Liz Contogiannis, whose family owns the Acropolis on North Eugene Street.

'There have been some who've seen the outside and heard about the outside dining and come to eat,' she says. 'It gives you a big-city feel.'

Small bites - that's what rejuvenating downtown is about, Black says. You nibble on the low-hanging fruit while you wait for the hot fudge sundae.

A couple of things have kept the dessert cart from rolling by. One is multiple owners. Three hundred people own property downtown, making multiple headaches for anyone needing a large parcel.

The biggest hurdle, though, is property values. Land costs \$15 to \$30 a square foot downtown vs. \$2 to \$4 a square foot in the so-called 'green fields of suburbia.'

The price of downtown land is inflated, Black says, because of deep-pocket corporations that have paid top dollar to be downtown.

But Greensboro isn't swimming in big corporations, Black warns, and don't hold your breath waiting for local developers to toss cash at downtown. Greensboro is a city of relatively small developers, most averse to risk.

'Financially, this is the most conservative place I've ever been in my life,' he says. 'As you look at some downtowns that have been successful, there have been some gunslingers, some risk takers.'

To ease the risk, DGI is considering asking the city for money for low-interest loans or for loan guarantees for downtown projects.

For a large-scale project, Black says, it's going to take large-scale money, probably from local government or a foundation that would buy several parcels, then issue a request for proposals.

It would make the most sense for government to sock money into downtown, Black believes, because they would kill two pigeons with one stone. They'd expand the tax base and keep the city from sprawling.

One thing is for sure. The downtown Greensboro of tomorrow will be different from the downtown Greensboro of yesterday, UNCG's Debbage says. In one respect, it will be the same. It will continue, as most downtowns, to be a center for banking, insurance and other professions that depend on lawyers, who depend on courthouses, which are almost always downtown.

By that measure, Debbage says, downtown Greensboro is successful. It has a way to go on other measures, though. Like many other cities its size, downtown Greensboro goes rather limp when the cube dwellers head home.

There are a few successful bars, restaurants and 20-something dance clubs, but the area could use more to draw people downtown after business hours. Those attractions logically would be entertainment-oriented, Debbage says - ``There's one thing Greensboro does well, and that's music and culture' - but they must be things you cannot find elsewhere in the city.

A new baseball stadium, perhaps. Maybe an amphitheater for regional talent. These are things that will draw people downtown, Debbage says. Forget downtown as a retail center. Specialty retail shops might do well, but downtowns, by and large, will not be a place that goods change hands.

``I respectfully and energetically disagree with him,' Black says, adding that large-scale retailing could be a possibility in 10 to 15 years. ``It's in a lot of communities our size.'

Dreaming big comes easily to Black, who as a child in Atlanta tried to dig to China. He and a friend shoveled for three days. They never got there, but they made one heck of a dent in the back yard.

He throws his head back 40 years and belly laughs.

The memories of what he had - a life around downtown - sit on his shoulder and whisper to him yet.

``God, it was so much fun,' he says. ``I would give anything to be back there.'

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