

From The NWA Online

Womack Tours Downtown Rogers To See Revitalization Efforts Under Way

by Scarlet Sims | Sep. 23, 2014

ROGERS -- A group of downtown business and property owners clustered around U.S. Rep. Steve Womack, R-Ark., Monday afternoon as he toured loft-style apartments under renovation at the historic City Hall near the intersection of Third and Elm streets.

"There's a lot of history in this place," Womack said.

The building, built in 1929, has 16-foot to 19-foot ceilings throughout; large, old-fashioned windows; tongue-and-groove wood floors; and features left over from the days when the building housed City Hall, the police and fire departments and the library. In one loft, a Rogers Police Department shield is painted on the wall. Another apartment has a vault that will remain part of the unit. Two loft apartments have doors that once rolled on tracks along the ceiling so the city's fire trucks could leave the building.

The loft development is among several projects under way in Rogers meant to attract people to live downtown, said Julie Winn, who manages City Hall Lofts. By next summer, downtown will have at least 23 apartments, she said. That includes the 11 lofts Winn oversees. The lofts should be ready to rent in October, but five are reserved, Winn said.

Rogers' leaders are focused on attracting businesses, building a nightlife and carving out places for people to live -- all downtown, Winn said.

"This is just the beginning," Winn said.

Businesses, including Brick Street Brews and Valere Rene Handbags & Totes, opened in rehabilitated buildings this year, according to a report handed out before the tour. On Tuesday, men were working to finish renovations at Parkside Public, a soon-to-be hamburger restaurant with 12 beers on draft. The business should open by December, said Shane Zimmerman, an owner.

In the next 10 years, Rogers will be a more professional version of Dickson Street, the Fayetteville historic area known for restaurants, shops and nightlife, Winn said. Where Dickson Street tends to attract college students, the hope is Rogers will attract professionals, she said.

The way to a lively downtown hasn't been easy, Womack said. Rogers has struggled to overcome obstacles its sister cities haven't faced to create its own identity, he said. There is no large university in Rogers, no global corporation like Walmart and no river, he said. The city has had to be "scrappy" and diverse, Womack said.

"Everything we've been able to do, we've had to do on our own," he said.



STAFF PHOTO BEN GOFF • @NWABen Goff U.S. Rep. Steve Womack, R-Ark., left, talks with a group from Main Street Rogers while touring the City Hall Lofts as part of a walking tour of new businesses in downtown Rogers on Monday. Other stops included Parkside Public, which hopes to open in November, and Brick Street Brews, which opened recently.

The projects under way are not cheap either, Winn said. City Hall Lofts have cost about \$1 million in renovation work so far, she said. People are talking about renovating other buildings, she said.

A plan designed to revitalize downtown should be unveiled early next year, said Dana Mather, interim director of Main Street Rogers.

Womack said he hopes to advocate at the federal level for policies that encourage redevelopment and renovations for downtowns, he said.

“(Downtowns) are part of the heart of who we are,” Womack said. “We need to bring them alive again.”