

## LAWRENCEVILLE REVITALIZATION



Staff Photo: Jason Braverman

Emory Morsberger said he has been drawn to the Square since the 1970s, when he studied history at Emory University and worked as a paralegal. Today, he owns much of the land surrounding downtown Lawrenceville. On Thursday, Morsberger will break ground on the first homes on the Square, which includes 32 town houses and condominiums. His long term plan is to have 500 residential units within walking distance of downtown in the next five years.

# 'We've come a long way'

## Five years after Morsberger's first purchase, city seeing benefits from redevelopment

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LAWRENCEVILLE — When he was in business school, Emory Morsberger studied Walt Disney.

As the entertainment giant planned for Disney World, he started buying property in Florida under the names of fake companies to amass enough land to build the amusement park and keep prices low.

When Morsberger decided to take on downtown Lawrenceville, he took a page from Disney's book.

Sweet Rod's Hair Salon wanted to build in the

Square. So did Elmer's Hardware. And Gertie's Antiques.

Soon, property owners began talking at the First Baptist Church across the street. More transactions had taken place in the prior year than Lawrenceville had seen in the previous 30. Morsberger started getting calls from reporters, but he had sworn his staff to secrecy.

"They never did figure out all those goofy LLCs," he said. "You're better off quietly accumulating as much mass as you can before you start fixing things. I spent a year and a half buying property before anyone knew what I was doing."

That was five years ago. Today, the Aurora Theatre calls the Square home. Lawrenceville

Rings brings New Year's revelers downtown. There is a resurgence of restaurants and shops in the county seat. And Thursday, Morsberger will break ground on the first homes on the Square.

The first project, 32 town houses and condominiums, is just part of Morsberger's plan to have 500 residential units within walking distance of downtown in the next five years. He plans walking trails that will link the Square to nearby Rhodes Jordan Park and the Gwinnett Justice and Administration Center, improved streetscapes and even more businesses.

The condos and town houses are scheduled to open next September.

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# Lawrenceville:

## 'There's a huge amount of historical character'

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### Historic purchase

Morsberger said he has been drawn to the Square since the 1970s, when he studied history at Emory University and worked as a paralegal for Alston, Miller and Gaines. He came to Lawrenceville to do title work, and fell in love with the historic Square and all the old buildings.

"This Square works better than just about any county seat square in Georgia," Morsberger said. "There's a huge amount of historic character."

So after years of revitalizing duplexes and quadraplexes in Snellville, in a neighborhood Morsberger dubbed Avalon after King Arthur's mythical castle, he took the profits from reselling the homes to buy the first of 35 Lawrenceville properties. The old post office, purchased five years ago, now houses offices.

But that first purchase almost didn't happen. Morsberger wasn't the high bidder for the property. He got the post office when that bidder didn't get the money to close the deal.

Even if the post office purchase had failed, Morsberger said, he still would have kept trying to buy in Lawrenceville's downtown.

The space where Lil' River Grill now serves meals was a burned-out shell next to two foundations, Morsberger said. But he saw the potential of the historic courthouse, the hospital, the county's administrative center and a new college that opened last year.

"We've come a long way," he said, halfway through his 10-year plan for the city. "I knew all along it would be difficult and take time. At first when we started, no one was here."

### Cultural impact

Morsberger said cultural activities have brought people downtown as much as the new food options and businesses have.

There are ghost tours, book signings and concerts on the Square. And the Aurora Theatre, which opened in May, brought patrons to Lawrenceville and a reason to build a parking deck — something else Morsberger said will help with the city center's walkability.

"They're grand slam home runs for Lawrenceville," he said. "In the long run, I see us passing

Decatur in terms of variety of restaurants and cultural activities."

As Georgia Gwinnett College grows and adds more lectures and other activities, Morsberger said, it will also be a draw for area residents.

The redeveloper has sold off some downtown properties in order to keep momentum going faster than he could fix up the buildings himself. But he'll only sell to people he thinks will put as much into the buildings as he has.

Morsberger has a running contest with Bobby Sikes, who owns Bobby Sikes Fine Art and Design on West Crogan Street, to see whose store fronts can look better. He doesn't want the downtown, which has gone from being an eyesore to a destination, to look like a dump any longer.

### Living on the Square

Rod Britton, the Morsberger Group's president — and namesake for Sweet Rod's Hair Salon — said everything is going as intended. Last week, the Group acquired 8.93 acres on Oak Street, where Gwinnett County's administrative offices had been and where Britton expects to build about 100 more town houses and condos.

"We're exactly where we planned to be," he said.

The original 32 units, with this week's groundbreaking, will be built on the site of a Wachovia bank and its parking lot at the corner of Crogan, Culver and Luckie streets. Initial sales have been good, Morsberger said, with interest from empty nesters who want to live near Lawrenceville's amenities without worrying about unmowed lawns.

"They want to be able to lock and leave," he said. "They want to be able to go to Gulf Shores for a month, or France, or the mountains and not worry about it."

According to the project's Web site, units can range from \$150,000 to more than \$500,000 and 700 to more than 2,800 square feet.

Morsberger said several people came up to him a year ago, when the project was first announced, asking to be the first to buy in the community. It's a statement of how far Lawrenceville has come.

"It's amazing how much junk was here," Morsberger said. "We're bringing restaurants, creating residential. ... We're accomplishing all our goals."