Realizing Urban Dreams
by Kristen Phillips

As new projects and development in Jackson move forward with a vibrant energy, you can feel the heartbeat JoAnne Prichard Morris talks about in “Greater Jackson: Welcome Home;” it continues to beat stronger. Not long ago, ideas and visions for the capital city seemed as if they might never progress past the dreams of Jackson idealists. Today those lofty hopes are manifesting in the most tangible and realistic ways all over the city.

On March 27, 2008, a crowd gathered inside the newly renovated ballroom at Union Station. Yes, this was theground breaking for the renovation of the King Edward Hotel in downtown Jackson, but it was more than that: We were breaking ground on the city of Jackson—the new Jackson—embracing the urbanism that’s bringing energy and life to the city. You could feel it from everyone in attendance.

Few people really grasped the concept at first—this “creative class” idea. Many brushed it off as something that is great for other cities but “would never work in Jackson.”

The few who did get it held it tightly and became its champions. They clung so tightly to their convictions that not even a hurricane could snatch it from their grip. Thank goodness. Because it took a hurricane to wake everyone else up.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina did a number on the state of Mississippi. Katrina also changed our state of mind. If you had to find an unseen benefit in the mess her fierce winds left behind, you can find it here.

Shortly after Katrina collided with Mississippi, the federal government passed the Gulf Opportunity Act of 2005, better known as “GO Zone” legislation. The law provides tax breaks and incentives to regions affected by the hurricane. Building homes and businesses became a viable option for many who would not have had the luxury to choose.

Hurricane damage in Jackson, roughly 150 miles inland, was minimal compared to the devastation on the Coast, but GO Zone funds gave Jackson the opportunity to rebuild as well. Developers and investors could no longer ignore the financial ben-

Standard Life

With the King Edward Hotel renovation underway, David Watkins is ready to start making more things happen.

In 2007, the Jackson Redevelopment Authority awarded ownership of the Standard Life building to Watkins and his partner, HR Properties of New Orleans.

“Our plans are to convert the old office building into apartments,” Watkins says. “It will be a mixed-use facility, but primarily residential with 50 to 60 upscale apartments, retail on the first floor, and possibly a restaurant cluster in the buildings attached to the Standard Life that line Roach Street.”

The restaurant cluster would involve multiple restaurants sharing one kitchen to reduce the burden of upfront investments and operating costs. Watkins says that this would be the first example of this idea in the country, news he delivers with an ear-to-ear grin.

“We’re just trying to think of ways to get creative,” he says.

Old Capitol Green

When Entergy first proposed the Old Capitol Green project, the idea was to develop four blocks of mostly unused land along Jefferson Street between Pearl and Court streets. But when Full Spectrum of New York—a national leader in mixed-use and mixed-income green, urban development—got a chance to discuss the project, they had much bigger ideas.

Where the city saw four blocks to develop, Carlton Brown, co-founder of Full Spectrum and ’89 Lanier High School graduate, saw 14, along with a chance to bring 4,000 households and a new way of living to the downtown area.

“We shared our vision for Old Capitol Green,” he says. “And that vision was that the city needed something transformative.”

Old Capitol Green will be a community the likes of which no one in Jackson has seen. Phase one will bring 500 households to the area, and will begin to display the beautiful landscape, streetscape and green space planned for all 14 blocks.

Brown and Full Spectrum hope to bring a different way of thinking to the development profile in Jackson. They are using all the development buzz words popular nationally: live, work and play, green, sustainable, and energy efficient.

“We all know there’s something wrong with the environment,” Brown says. “We may not know exactly what that is, but we know what we can do better.”

Full Spectrum’s plans for Old Capitol Green include making buildings more energy efficient, with better indoor air quality, solar panels and a plan to help return the hydrology profile to its pre-development profile.

“When you’re talking about building a sustainable city, you’ve got to talk about what it’s going to look like 50 years from now,” Brown says.

Farish Street

Entertainment District

The idea of a Jackson version of Beale Street makes most people’s mouth water. For while it looked like that craving might dry up long before the first band or first daiquiri would ever come back to the Farish Street entertainment district. Today, though, many of the inevitable development problems are, hopefully, on their way to being resolved.

Performa Entertainment Real Estate Inc.

“Imagination and bold vision lay at the heart of Jackson’s founding, and visionary plans are taking shape today. ... A city, like a living thing, is only as vital as its heart, and the heart of Jackson continues to beat strong with the passing of time.”

—JoAnne Prichard Morris

“Greater Jackson: Welcome Home,” Introduction Essay

ish Street, between Amite and Hamilton, by the end of 2008. Wet Willy’s Daiquiri Bar and a B.B. King Blues club are two of the tenants scheduled to move in by year’s end.

Located off Capitol Street, the Farish Street district was once a nucleus of commerce and entertainment for African Americans in Jackson. With a project estimated at more than $12 million, Performa intends to bring back the neighborhood’s historic culture and character, when the Alamo Theater anchored the success of the area.

Performa’s plan includes 100,000 square feet of retail, entertainment and restaurants, 84 two-story apartments, 60 townhouses, 30 shotgun houses and an 80-lot cottage-house development. Blues, jazz and good food will restore the vibrant nightlife residents and visitors used to enjoy here.

Walker acknowledges that the original plan called for completion of the Farish district sooner, but says he is encouraged by the current progress along with the other developments nearby.

“It’s all happening in the right sequence,” he says. “The King Edward, the convention center, the Pinnacle—everything will be coming online around the same time.”