

LEVERAGING PUBLIC  
INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS

The Role of Arts-based Economic  
Development Strategies in Rural  
Georgia Communities

# STATESBORO



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## STATESBORO: Saving Downtown with Art

On a sunny summer day, the Averitt Center for the Arts in downtown Statesboro is hopping. Parents are dropping their children off for a fun day of camp and soon the rooms in this historic building are filled with children learning to paint, dance, sing and perform.

Looking at this vibrant building in the middle of downtown, it's hard to believe it once was called "an eyesore," and the busy downtown around it was considered "dead."

But that was indeed the case in the late 1990s, when many buildings in downtown Statesboro were in disrepair, including the Statesboro Bank building, a neighboring theater and the old Jaeckel Hotel.

In looking for a way to revitalize downtown, several city leaders – led by then mayor David "Hal" Averitt – had an idea: Restore the bank building into an arts center. The thinking was the rest would follow.

That plan worked. The \$5 million project – paid for out of a combination of private and public funding – took two years to complete. Now 15 years later, the Averitt Center for the Arts – named for the man who championed the cause – is the centerpiece of downtown Statesboro. It has built itself into a solid program in the arts, offering visual arts, dance, theatre and music through performances, classes, camps and after school programs. In the meantime, other buildings have been restored, new businesses have opened and downtown Statesboro has come alive again.

"The Averitt Center is now at the heart of this community," says Statesboro Councilmember Phil Boyum. "It's a constant presence that gives people a reason to come downtown."

The Averitt's success can be attributed to the core group of people who helped see it to fruition, a visionary board, commitment from the city and a collaborative relationship with Georgia Southern University, located two miles from downtown. Here is their story.

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– Phil Boyum, Statesboro Councilmember



Averitt Center for the Arts. Photos courtesy of Danielle Brannon

### First, start with the bank

The Bank of Statesboro – Bulloch County’s first bank – has a history dating back to 1895. It re-located several times before it settled at 33 Main St. The bank fell victim to the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression and permanently shuttered in 1932. Though it was used for several purposes throughout the years, the bank building eventually stayed empty and fell into disrepair.

The building next door – the Georgia Theater – had a similar rise and fall. It opened in 1936 with a showing of “Ladies in Love” and entertained theater-goers with first run movies like “Gone with the Wind.” It later struggled with competition from larger theater complexes and people leaving downtown. The theater ultimately closed in 1984, and also remained empty for years.

“It was a success out of the gate, there was a lot of excitement in the fact they took two dead buildings that were decayed and tied them together to breathe life into them.”

– Carol Thompson, former executive director of the Performing Arts Center at Georgia Southern University

When a group of city leaders realized something needed to be done to turn downtown Statesboro around, those two buildings became the focus of redevelopment efforts. In 1997, both buildings were purchased by the city. Mayor Averitt had the vision of transforming the bank into an arts center and appointed a committee to conduct a feasibility study.

After the committee determined an arts center would be a viable option, it set a plan in place. “We decided we wanted to build a community theater,” remembers DeWayne Grice, a business editor for The Statesboro Herald who served on the committee. “We wanted to present something the community could buy into.”

Beyond saving downtown, the committee saw a benefit for its citizens. “Part of that study showed the positive impact of arts education,” Grice says. “Having an arts center could make a difference in lifestyle.”

There were skeptics: some people were wary of the arts and the type of people that it would bring into the city. Yet the committee prevailed and through private dollars and public funding – including a \$1 million Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST), money from the hotel/motel tax and other public sources – the city was able to renovate and restore both the bank and the theater. On September 9, 2004, the Averitt Center for the Arts opened on 33 Main Street, as did the Emma Kelly Theater next door, which was renamed for the Bulloch County singer and pianist who was known as the “Lady of 6,000 Songs.”

“It was a success out of the gate,” says Carol Thompson, who is the former executive director of the Performing Arts Center at Georgia Southern University, an Averitt board member and an actress. “There was a lot of excitement in the fact they took two dead buildings that were decayed and tied them together to breathe life into them.”



Photos courtesy of Danielle Brannon

### **Growing the Averitt**

Before the doors opened, a board of directors was in place and they had hired the first executive director: Tim Chapman, a Georgia Southern University (GSU) graduate who was currently teaching at the university.

“From the very beginning, we had a good structure for programming,” says Chapman, who served as executive director until 2016. “We did a lot of community theater. We had gallery openings and some educational programs. That first year, when we announced our season, we sold almost the entire theater in season ticket sales. That is unheard of in most venues. It was a great first year.”

The Averitt also benefitted from an unofficial partnership with GSU, the region’s largest employer located just a few miles away. In fact, Kathryn Grube, wife of GSU’s then President Bruce Grube, was an original board member and was instrumental in helping to get the center off the ground.

“Georgia Southern art, music and theatre faculty were involved in the programming from the beginning,” says Chapman. “It wouldn’t have worked as nicely without the school as a partner. The relationship helped elevate what we could do in terms of the level of performers and people exhibiting.”

Kelly Berry, director of Georgia Southern’s theatre program, who came to the university about the same time the Averitt was opening and now serves on the board, agrees that it was a collaborative relationship from the beginning. “There was never any competition,” he says. “We have always shared resources and helped each other out. It works very well that way.”

### **Redeveloping Downtown**

Though the Downtown Statesboro Development Authority (DSDA) was created in 1987, most say it got its sea legs after the Averitt opened. Suddenly there was a downtown to preserve and create. City Hall – housed in the old Jaeckel Hotel building – was renovated and restored. The DSDA played a role in sprucing up downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods, buying buildings, renovating them and selling them. The organization helped the Averitt acquire the building that is now the Mical Whitaker Black Box Theater (named for Georgia Hall of Fame thespian Mical Whitaker), located a few blocks from the main building.

“Every shopping center needs an anchor tenant,” says DSDA Executive Director Allen Muldrew. “Averitt is downtown’s anchor tenant. It’s the biggest draw and offers the biggest variety.”

When the DSDA puts on its signature events – such as the Farmer’s Market and First Fridays – the Averitt keeps its doors open so people can use the restrooms, enjoy the air conditioning and get a look at the inside of the building.

“The Averitt has an excellent partnership with downtown,” Councilman Boyum says. “By constantly participating in these activities, it helps create a collaborative environment. You can’t have one group doing everything. Everyone has to work together.”

Muldrew says that they also use the Averitt as a selling tool in attracting new businesses.

“We bring all new prospects through the center,” he says. “We give them the numbers, and tell them what this organization does. And the Averitt is pretty good about partnering with businesses – they understand their role in economic development. It’s not only to bring people downtown, but also to facilitate them going to other businesses. It is an economic engine.”



Photos courtesy of Danielle Brannon

“The only way you save buildings is by putting them to use, so by putting the arts center in downtown, we achieved multiple wins.”

– Allen Muldrew, Executive Director, Downtown Statesboro Development Authority

### The Averitt Today

Besides the main building and the Emma Kelly Theater, the Arts Center has expanded to include several buildings: a Center for Performing Arts (which includes the Black Box Theater), and the Roxie Remley Center for Fine Arts, which houses a pottery studio. The Emma Kelly Theater hosts 57 shows a year in performances, rentals and recitals.

After Tim Chapman left in 2016, Carol Thompson served as interim director for a year. In 2017, the board hired Jamie Grady, a theatre professional with an arts management background, as its executive director. Under Grady’s leadership, the Averitt has continued to grow. The center now has 11 fulltime and six part-time employees and 30 seasonal employees. The Averitt relies on income from membership dues, the city, the hotel/motel tax and programming. (Note: Grady left in July 2019).

Though the Averitt is a success – the programs continue to grow with summer camps and after school programs – those in Statesboro say there is still room for improvement in terms of downtown.

“We need to do more to get the students downtown,” says Grice.

City leaders are hoping that will change with “The Blue Mile” revitalization project, which is focused on the one-mile stretch of Main Street that connects downtown with the GSU campus. In 2017, the city was the third place winner of the America’s Best Communities competition, earning them \$1 million to put towards the project.

Kelly says the fact that the university has moved some of its programs downtown – including a digital fabrication laboratory called FabLab – should help to bring students and faculty downtown. FabLab is housed in the City Center – a complex of three buildings that the city owns and is leasing to GSU. The University’s Business Innovation Group, the Small Business Development Center and the Center for Business Analysis and Economic Research all occupy space in the City Center.

The hope is these efforts will also solve another problem – getting more restaurants downtown. “There are about 13,000 cars that come through here a day,” says Grice. “Yet there is not a lot after 5 p.m.”

Still, challenges aside, no one discounts the impact the Averitt has had on downtown Statesboro.

“The only way you save buildings is by putting them to use,” says Muldrew. “So by putting the arts center in downtown, we achieved multiple wins. That’s probably the best you can do in downtown - save a building, bring in a businesses, and the icing on the cake was the arts center.”



Photos courtesy of Danielle Brannon