

Capturing the heart of the community, the “Around Town, Carousels Abound” public art program has stirred renewed interest in the arts through the 37 beautifully crafted carousel horses on permanent display around the community. Co-founded by two private citizens, “Carousels Abound” celebrates our treasured Dentzel Carousel, is fast becoming a big tourist attraction and raises money for Hope Village for Children.



July Meridian Symphony pops concert and fireworks show at Bonita Lakes and the Christmas tree lighting ceremony at City Hall.

Several of the “Carousels Abound” horses are located downtown, adding still another dimension to our rapidly diversifying downtown. New residents are enjoying urban living at the Front Street apartments, the Union Hotel apartments and the Rosenbaum Building condominiums. The number of downtown restaurants has jumped a

Community Development

Promoting the arts was also the goal of the Cultural Affairs Division's Gallery and Artists Tour, featuring local galleries and artists as well as a student art competition. The annual Arts in the Park was again a huge success, both artistically and economically. In ticket sales alone, the festival generated more than \$68,000. Our Cultural Affairs staff also stayed involved in the annual “Main Event” business expo at the Lauderdale County Agri-Center, the exceedingly popular Fourth of

dramatic 400 percent, and more than 50 new downtown businesses opened during the year, representing private investment of more than \$18 million. Coordinated through the Main Street Division, this level of private investment reflects the business community's confidence in the future of downtown. At Union Station, the linchpin of the downtown core, meeting room bookings rebounded after a post-September 11 slump, and plans are under way to install another round of brick pavers as part of the Union Station Patrons Club program.

Our Planning Division staff is also involved in downtown development. Planners were awarded a Certified Local Government grant to conduct a survey of properties within the Urban Center and Union Station historic districts and the areas between the districts. Staff also applied for a \$256,000 grant to make improvements at City Hall and a \$20,000 Riley

Foundation grant to preserve three historic photo collections.

To encourage residential and commercial development, our staff crafted a more responsive zoning ordinance that speeds up the process for consideration of variance requests. They also coordinated the program that allows the city to maintain a Class 8 rating from the National Flood Insurance Program, which saves residents 10 percent on their flood insurance. The staff is coordinating the rehabilitation of 10 single-family residential units with a \$350,000 grant from the HOME program. Seventeen additional homes were repaired when 116 Southern Baptist youth missionaries returned to Meridian for their fourth project here.

Potential residents are being encouraged to relocate to Meridian through the Retiree Recruitment program. In the past year, the staff answered more than 1,500 inquiries, resulting in a total of 70 retirees who have moved to Meridian since the program started.

Once again, the Keep Meridian/Lauderdale County Beautiful's Youth Mini-Grant program spurred youth groups around the community to create vegetable gardens, butterfly sanctuaries and other beautification projects. More than 400 young people picked up litter, planted bulbs and spruced up around their neighborhoods, schools and churches during the Great American Cleanup. Hundreds more volunteers gathered at Okatibbee Lake to pick up litter, make bird boxes and fish shelters and plant wildlife food plots in celebration of National Public Lands Day.

With the adoption and enforcement of the latest building, electrical, mechanical, plumbing and gas codes, the staff of the Inspections Division has been instrumental in lowering local residents' insurance rates. Last year, the staff made more than 11,000 inspections and issued 2,034 permits, including building permits with a construction value of \$28.3 million.



Opposite page: A flag quilt is proudly unfurled at its new home in Union Station; above: Inspectors Larry Vance and, center photo, Ward Ford check out construction sites for code compliance; left: "Rosie the Riveter" recreates her famous poster pose as part of the Smithsonian Institution's "Produce for Victory" exhibit at the REA Building as part of a nationwide tour.