

‘Renaissance’ now

Madison leaders reflect on past to move forward



District 8 Council Member Nancy VanReece at Amqui Station and Visitors Center in Madison on Monday. Madison grew into a small commercial powerhouse in the 1960s and '70s. During that era, Madison boasted the fifth largest retail hub in Tennessee.

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Jean Robinson remembers when Madison didn't have its own high school.

She remembers when the shopping center at Madison Square was a thriving retail destination; not a strip mall with two different retail dollar stores. And before that, when a private estate occupied that land on Gallatin Pike.

"We had one restaurant," Robinson recalled. "Nobody went out to eat because there was no place! If you were fortunate to go, you had to stand on the sidewalk and wait your turn to get in."

Robinson, 80, has seen her hometown change and grow over the years. She's been waiting for more, and now, it's coming. For Robinson, the new 32-acre Madison Station development represents unprecedented investment in her hometown, which she has long viewed as the "stepchild" of Davidson County.

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Outside at Amqui Station and Visitors Center in Madison on Thursday. The station is an old train depot on the Louisville to Nashville railroad and is one of the key historical sites in Madison that is currently being transformed.

PHOTOS BY NICOLE HESTER/THE TENNESSEAN

By the numbers

What you need to know about housing, prices in Madison. **18A**

Madison

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Development aims to echo rich history

The town that blossomed along the railroad connecting Louisville to Nashville has long been a refuge of affordability, cultural diversity, music and thriving business. Metro Council members and community leaders have favorably dubbed the recent focus on the neighborhood a “renaissance.”

Madison has celebrated an identity of its own for more than 100 years. New development plans aim to reflect that.

“It’s all well-rooted in its history,” District 8 Council Member Nancy VanReece said. She represents the Madison Station area. “We’re trying to make sure any development happens for us and not to us.”

As president of the Madison-Rivergate Area Chamber of Commerce, Laura Knotts knows Madison professionally. As a longtime resident, she also knows it personally. As part of her job, Knotts works to foster connections throughout the community.

“I know a lot of people who have lived in Madison for a long time want to see a return to what they used to have,” Knotts said. “The downtown area used to have pet store, hardware store, everything within walking distance. This investment in our area could signal a return to that.”

History is something Robinson knows well. She attended Taylor Stratton Elementary at its original location, where the Madison branch of the Nashville Public Library now stands. The grade school was named for James Taylor Stratton, a descendant of Madison Stratton, who came to the area with his two brothers in 1840.

Robinson’s father was one of the men who advocated for a Madison high school. She remembers being disappointed — she didn’t want to leave her friends for a new, smaller high school closer to home. But Madison’s population ballooned after World War II, and the area continued to grow into a small commercial powerhouse in the 1960s and ’70s, taking full advantage of the mid-century rise in suburban shopping.

During that era, Madison boasted the fifth largest retail hub in Tennessee. J.C. Penny’s was the anchor store at the Madison Square Shopping Center; high-end retail options included Levy’s and McClures.

And now, the epicenter of the “Madison Renaissance” is happening on that same site.

The parking lot and buildings of the once-vibrant Madison Square Shopping Center will be completely transformed over the next few years, thanks to a multi-million dollar deal approved by Metro Council in early January.

Designs for the 1.7-million-square foot “Madison Station” development include 1,694 multi-family residential housing units, office and retail space, public parks, greenways and multimodal roads.



Cars drive down Gallatin Pike in Madison on Thursday.

PHOTOS BY NICOLE HESTER/THE TENNESSEAN

The \$37 million in tax incentives approved by Metro will pay for infrastructure improvements, while the total cost of privately-funded development is an estimated \$631 million. Texas-based Artesia Real Estate and the Nashville-based Cauble Group are the project’s developers.

The road to change

VanReece says the plans will transform the Gallatin Pike corridor. She’s spent almost all of her eight years in office building a road to anchor future development.

“Infrastructure just... takes forever,” VanReece said of the Madison Station Boulevard project, which was in predevelopment for several years.

The boulevard transformed an underutilized side street into a small stretch of roadway with a traffic circle at the end. It’s complete with lighted sidewalks, bike paths, street lamps, speed bumps and crosswalks. The Madison Station development plan will take Madison Station Boulevard through the mixed-use area and out to Gallatin Pike on the other side.

On one side of the existing street is the public library and fire station. On the other is the community-focused Amqui Station, which hosts a farmer’s market from April to September, and a new music venue, set to open this fall.

VanReece views music as a central tenet of Madison’s comeback story.

“The music venue is a destination point,” VanReece said. “It’s the third leg of the stool. Dee’s Country Cocktail Lounge, Eastside Bowl and the new music venue come together to participate in the renaissance and draw people in. I get goosebumps thinking of it.”

Music is, in fact, just as much a part of Madison’s history as it is Nashville’s.

Recording studios Cinderella Sound and Starday-King Sound had a hand in

putting Madison on the music map with hit records from artists like James Brown, Steve Miller and Mickey Newbury. Opened in 1959, Cinderella Sound is older than many of the recording studios on Music Row.

Entertainment venues are a key area of investment for VanReece, who wants development in her district to honor Madison’s rich artistic history. But she hasn’t taken her eye off her goal of expanding affordable housing options.

About 10% of the housing units included in the Madison Station development will be affordable to households making between 60% and 80% of Nashville’s Area Median Income, according to the plan.

Hundreds of affordable housing units are in the development pipeline for the Madison area, and new affordable developments with income caps are in the process of taking their first applications.

Many of these projects have been built by LDG Development, a Louisville-headquartered real estate developer with properties across Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, Colorado and Texas.

Building an affordable future

Plans for Madison Station span up to ten years into the future. Madison could look dramatically different by then.

As infrastructure investment expands, property taxes are also expected to climb. Due to the structure of Madison Station’s multi-stage tax incentive plan, tax revenue will be reinvested into public infrastructure needed for the success of the development — greenways, parks, improved streets, storm water management and transit stations included.

But rising property values and land prices can come with rising rents and cost of living.

“There has been a significant interest in people to reimagine Madison from what it has been historically,” said Kay Bowers, a longtime affordable housing advocate in Nashville.

“When investors and developers come into a community, what they’re looking for is dollar signs. It’s a community that has a deep history, and people are attracted to that. So, all of a sudden what was once cheap land is no longer cheap.”

When the high cost of living creeps further and further outwards, working class people are forced to move further and further away, Bowers said.

“Unless there are enough people who come together to work hard to ensure people who want to stay there can stay there, it will become a story like any other city,” she said.

“And that has to come from a nucleus of people who believe enough in it to invest the time and effort to speak up. We have to speak up consistently, and we can’t let up.”



A car drives down a road recently made available for public use near the Amqui Station and Visitors Center on Thursday. Madison has celebrated an identity of its own for more than 100 years. New development plans aim to reflect that.