

Look who's emerging now: Visit 3 Florida Main Street projects in St. Petersburg

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The retro shuffleboard courts and outdoor tables at Urban Comfort are filled with millennials enjoying a modern take on Southern comfort food like fried green tomatoes, fried chicken and creamy grits, all washed down with local craft brews.

Urban Comfort is a great example of the transformation that is taking place in downtown St. Petersburg, especially in Grand Central District, the Edge District and 22nd Street South, also known as Deuces Live.

Dozens of locally owned restaurants, pubs and retail shops, like ARTpool Gallery, The Queens Head, Casita Taqueria and Pom Pom's Teahouse & Sandwicheria, are springing up in

these historic districts that not so long ago were boarded-up and run down.

“When I was looking for a place for my business, just by happenstance I drove into Grand Central and said, ‘This is it!’,” says Andy Salyards, who launched Urban Brew and BBQ in 2013 and Urban Comfort in 2015.

Several additional Urban venues – Urban Creamery, which will feature locally made ice cream, and Urban Provisions, a deli and lunch venue, are in the works. In addition, Salyards plans to add an onsite brewpub at Urban Comfort.

“A lot of people said to me, ‘Are you sure you want to go there?’ ” says Salyards. “This area had been bad for so long that people had stopped going. But not many places have this much character. It’s an historic part of town where the working class used to live and play.”

From automobile alley to restaurant row

Salyards, like many of the new business owners in Grand Central, the Edge and Deuces Live, is seeing an opportunity and seizing it. He’s also part of a local trend to embrace the neighborhood’s working class heritage.

This is especially evident in Grand Central, a part of town that in the 1940s and ‘50s was known as automobile alley.

Gas stations and car repair shops once lined Central Avenue from 16th Street North to 31st Street North – the district’s boundaries.

Today, the gas pumps are gone, but some of the distinctive architectural features from that era remain. Overhanging canopies where cars used to pull up for gas now shade customers from the elements as they sit at outdoor tables.

At last count, there were seven new restaurants that have been converted from gas stations.

At Urban Brew and BBQ, you’ll also see the colorful, hexagonal pavers that once paved city sidewalks – an iconic symbol of old St. Pete.

Florida Main Streets

Grand Central, the Edge District and Deuces Live are designated as Florida Main Streets by the State of Florida. Florida Main Street designation is both a marketing tool and an economic development opportunity for historic business districts that have fallen on hard times and need new energy and funding to resurrect themselves.

In order to apply, the districts must meet certain criteria. They must be walkable, have an historic character and be home to diverse businesses and services. In addition, there must be a paid, professional program manager, an active board of directors and a comprehensive revitalization plan in place.

It's hard to imagine now, but it took a lot of hard work to get Grand Central ready for Main Street designation in 2001, says Jeff Danner, President of the board of directors for the Grand Central District and owner of Danner Consulting.

Danner was a panelist at the annual Florida Main Street Conference held this past summer at the Renaissance Vinoy Resort in downtown St. Petersburg.

Other panelists included Lauren Ruiz, executive director of the Grand Central District; Leslie Curran, President of the Edge District and owner of ARTicles Gallery & Custom Framing; Gary Jones, senior planner with the City of St. Petersburg; and Gloria Campbell, a board member of Deuces Live and CEO of Advantage Training Systems.

Their panel presentation, "Making a Place in an Urban Space -- 15 years of Main Street in St. Petersburg," offered insights into what it took to create St. Pete's three Main Streets.

In the 1980s, "about 80 percent of the buildings in Grand Central were vacant, with the exception of struggling businesses, boarded-up buildings and lots of strip clubs," says Danner. "Zoning regulations in the '70s meant residential was no longer allowed there. We had to change that."

Residents in nearby Kenwood, a landmark St. Pete neighborhood with more than 1,100 Craftsmen Bungalow-style homes, got together to take a look at what could be done,

says Danner. Some began buying businesses in the District, taking advantage of the close walking distance from home.

The city got involved and changed the streetscape from four lanes to two, putting in angled parking that slowed traffic. Sidewalk cafes were approved and then signage went up to brand the district as Grand Central, helping create more of a neighborhood feel.

The Edge District

The story behind the Edge District is similar.

“When the decision was made to build Tropicana Field back in the 1980s, everyone thought baseball was going to be the saving grace for this part of town, but that didn’t happen,” says Curran, who as president of the [Edge Business District Association](#) was instrumental in helping the district rebound.

“I said early on, just wait. In 10 years this area is really going to be something,” says Curran. “In the last few years, we have certainly come a long way.”

The Edge District is located between Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Street North and 16th Street North and runs from 1st Avenue North to 1st Avenue South. Tropicana Field, home of the Tampa Bay Rays, is next door.

Once nearly deserted except for the St. Petersburg Police Department headquarters and [Ferg's Sports Bar & Grill](#), the Edge District, which received Florida Main Street designation in 2014, is showing signs of an amazing resurgence.

Restaurants like [Ricky P's Orleans Bistro](#) and markets like [Red Mesa Mercado](#) are attracting big crowds. [Green Bench Brewing Co.](#) is becoming the go-to community gathering spot for everyone from Acro Yoga St. Pete millennials performing stunts in the brewpub’s grassy backyard to cyclists on a pub crawl.

The Edge District even has its own monthly vintage “pop-up” market – [Brocante Market](#) and dozens of locally owned eclectic shops like [Bodhi Basics](#).

But the biggest change has been the addition of new mixed-use residential and retail developments like Fusion 1560, apartment homes, and 1010 Central, a condo development.

The key to future growth, says Curran, is to make sure that “we focus on a good mix of restaurants, clubs and residential and to bring in more retail shops.”

District Executive Director Barbara Voglewede reports that the Edge is undertaking a comprehensive plan to look at the best way to move forward, with multiple items on the table for discussion, such as design features of the buildings, streetscape, transportation and parking.

“We’re thinking ahead to the best use of our properties and making sure that all of the retail areas are filled in,” says Voglewede. “In keeping with the Florida Main Street model, we’re looking at areas that have been historically blighted and bringing them back to life.”

Also on the drawing board is the relocation of the St. Petersburg Police Department. The city plans to build a new facility on property just north of the police department’s current location – a move that will free up a significant block of additional real estate in the Edge District for redevelopment.

Deuces Live

Stretching along 22nd Street South from 8th Avenue South to 15th Avenue South, Deuces Live Main Street District was once the heart and soul of the city’s African-American community.

During its heyday in the 1930s, ‘40s and ‘50s, the Manhattan Casino, a landmark venue in the district, hosted big name entertainers from Ray Charles and Count Basie to James Brown. The club was a popular stop on what was called the “Chitlin’ Circuit during segregation.

“The history of this area is unparalleled,” says Gary Jones of the City of St. Petersburg. “Every jazz great came through this community at one time. We knew we had to preserve what was there.”

After decades of disrepair, the district, which was rebranded and received Florida Main Street Designation in 2011, is beginning to see signs of a resurgence.

While there is still work to do, new businesses like [Chiefs Creole Cafe](#), [Deuces BBQ](#) and [Gallerie 909](#), an art gallery and event space, are helping bring new life to this historic part of town.

Similar to the Edge District, plans are on the drawing board for streetscaping, landscaping and a public art project, says Veatrice Farrell, the Deuces Live Program Manager.

A two-mile urban, walkable [African-American Heritage Trail](#) celebrates the history of the area with markers showcasing the community's landmark businesses, churches, schools and organizations like the Manhattan Casino and the Carter G. Woodson African-American Museum.

St. Petersburg College made a major investment in the community this year with the opening of the new [St. Petersburg College Douglas L. Jamerson Midtown Center](#) and the purchase of two additional buildings from the [St. Petersburg Housing Authority](#).