

# MISSISSIPPI BUSINESS JOURNAL

## Madison County's Flora getting first new construction in decades

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### REACTING TO COUNTY'S WESTWARD MIGRATION, PARTNERS TO BUILD SMALL MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENT

Aaron Oliver has decided that he can stay ahead of Madison County development trends by returning to the past.

He wants to “build something new that looks old,” he said.

The thinking is that the county has room among all its spanking new 21st century-style developments for a bit of yesteryear, Oliver said in a recent interview.



AARON OLIVER

Oliver and his West Main LLC partners say they've got just the place to recreate that long ago time: Western Madison County's Flora, a town of 1,800 people whose last new downtown construction came during World War II, when the nearby Kearney Park small arms ammunitions plant was going big guns.

In line with the fondness of Flora's leaders for the past and desire to keep the town small, the West Main developers are limiting their condominium/commercial project to three unadorned wood-frame brick veneer buildings of 12,000 square feet each, built with steel supports.

"When we do it, it needs to look and feel old, because that is what gives Flora its charm," said Oliver, a Flora resident who owns construction company BayHill Services and Cypress South Realty with wife Amy.

Situated on a slightly more than one-acre mixed-use parcel on which a long-ago movie theater once stood, each of West Main's three buildings will have 6,000 square feet of condominium space on the second floors and an equal amount of space on the ground floor for commercial use. Each building will be served by a lobby elevator.

Parking will be on Main Street and behind the buildings, according to Oliver, who is joined in the project by fellow Mississippi natives Walt Lampton, Ray Kinney, Reed Robinson and Chase Williams.

All of the partners are under 40, but "pretty much everyone in the partnership has run a business, and in their own right been successful," Oliver said.

"We're looking to come out of the ground in April if the weather allows," he said, adding the buildings will go up consecutively.

Pricing on the condo units has not been determined. Nor have leasing rates for the commercial units. “We’ve got a range on the commercial space,” Oliver said. “It will be lower than they charge in Madison and Ridgeland,” he added, putting rents in those localities at around \$30 a square foot.

He said interest in the project so far has brought a potential tenant pool of restaurants, professional services and health care providers. West Main is also mulling possible retail tenants, he said.

“We’re actively assessing applications,” Oliver said. Rather than bring in businesses that would compete with ones already in Flora, West Main is “working to make sure we have the right mix to complement businesses that are already in town.”



To that end, the project will limit restaurant tenants to “three or so,” he added.

Oliver said his quest to capture the past led him to architect Tracy Ward, who with wife and architect Kimberly has an office in Flora and a specialty in historic design.

“The secret weapon is actually our architect,” Oliver said of Ward.

He said his first question to Ward was: Can you give us something new that looks old?

Yes he could, Oliver said.

He said when he first saw the designs, his reaction to Ward was: “You just hit it out of the park.”

The design also won favor from town officials, he said.

“We have plenty of politics involved in this,” Oliver said of the town’s allegiance to maintaining its “Mayberry-esque” ambience.

A Mississippi State University graduate with a career as a general contractor, Oliver had West Main on the drawing board for seven years. But until now, the timing has not been right for either town officials or the marketing of the mix-use buildings.

Investing in a small town nearly 20 miles from Interstate 55 and an equal number from Jackson meant he had to get the timing right. He said he saw enough westward migration of rooftops and businesses to put his money on Flora.

“Flora is less than 30 miles from 2,390 businesses with 242,000 employees,” Oliver said, estimating the population in a 30-mile radius at over 291,000 people.

Flora is 20 minutes from the three million square-foot Amazon distribution warehouse in Canton and the Continental Tire factory “is just down the road,” he said. Both have large workforces.

Projections, according to Oliver, are that Madison County will have double digit growth over the new decade. He said he thinks the county’s school district is fueling much of the population growth.

“The school district is the ‘X’ factor,” he said.

Oliver suspects the interest from office space and retail users stems from the same desire he has – to stay “a little ahead.”

“They can see it, absolutely,” he said. “It is all driven by what is happening to the east.”

Flora’s heyday came during World War II when the Army built an installation at Kearney Park for producing ammunition. The town was bursting with soldiers and civilian contractors.

“Then the war is over and people go away,” Oliver said. “Downtown Flora was kind of forgotten about.”

Oliver does not see that happening again. But he does recall some unease that came just after he bought the downtown parcel. He had a street-side encounter with a man who asked him what he would do with the property. Informed of the plans, “he looked at me and said, ‘Why would anyone want to build anything in downtown Flora?’ and drove off.”

It was the kind of remark, Oliver said, that reminds him that “development is not for the faint of heart, I can assure you.”