



DOWNTOWN SARASOTA: BACK TO THE FUTURE & OPEN FOR BUSINESS

Downtown Sarasota is open for business! It is now and will continue to be open during the much anticipated downtown improvements starting this summer. You may have noticed some activity already. It's an exciting time to be downtown and experience firsthand our season of change, which when finished, will enhance the driving, shopping and living experience in downtown, plus restore a bit of Sarasota history.

For the past several months, the City of Sarasota, the Downtown Improvement District, the Downtown Sarasota Alliance and other stakeholders have partnered to strategize about how best to communicate information to those impacted by the improvement projects. We've assembled a dedicated working team focused on marketing and information dissemination. Not only are we committed to building a better downtown, we're committed to making these improvements as non-disruptive as possible, by providing user-friendly road signs directing visitors to free public and free valet parking; providing regular construction updates to residents and business owners; and providing a one-stop information source for project updates throughout the summer at www.sarasotagov.com

Suffolk Construction has already started work on the parking garage on Palm Avenue. With its modern eye catching design, we envision it becoming yet another reason for visitors to find downtown Sarasota desirable. When it's completed in December 2010, you'll be able to enjoy a stunning piece of civic architecture and park your vehicle (or bicycle) in the same location.

During the month of June, portions of Main Street, from Five Points to Palm Avenue, will be accessible to pedestrian-only traffic. Vehicular traffic will be detoured while a 50-year-old water main is replaced. Your favorite restaurants and stores along Main Street still will be open for business, so please continue to patronize them. Free public parking is available and free valet parking will be provided at several convenient locations (including Main St. and Palm Ave., Main St. and Lemon Ave., and Five Points) with plenty of visible signs to guide you.

While improvements are underway, the annual boat parade will go on as usual. It's a signature community event which draws approximately 40,000 visitors to downtown every summer. The parade has been a focal point of discussions with the Five Points

contractor, Jon F. Swift, Inc., who has pledged to finish construction and re-open Main Street in time for our Fourth of July festivities. Bring your family downtown and check out our season of change in person! The boat parade will be Thursday, July 1st. Days later, the Downtown Sarasota Alliance will host its first annual July 4th Street Party. And, the night will conclude with our traditional spectacular fireworks display.

Immediately following July 4th, the metamorphous will continue as we go back in time to improve the heart of our downtown. Five Points, where Main Street, Central Avenue and Pineapple Avenue converge, will return to its original design, albeit this time as a modern, well-functioning roundabout. The area was platted in 1885 by the Florida Mortgage and Investment Company whose chief engineer, Richard Paulson, proclaimed “We will lay out the town of Sarasota from this hub.” Louis Colson, an African-American who founded the “Overtown” community (today’s “Rosemary District”) worked for Paulson and drove the stake that marked this central point upon which our community has since radiated.

In 1917, our local World War I heroes were honored when a flagpole, with a Stars and Stripes flag, donated by Mrs. Bertha Palmer, was erected in the center of Five Points. When the veterans came home, ‘WELCOME BUDDIES’ was painted here to welcome them. Local historians, the Sarasota County Veterans’ Commission and City staff, have collaborated to bring back this piece of history. The message to all our veterans of, “Welcome Buddies”, will be restored and the American flag will fly high again at the center of it all, surrounded by lush greenery and red brick pavers. Finally, the beautiful clock which stands in Five Points Park today is the very piece which projected from the Palmer Bank building almost a century ago. Under the clock, a plaque will be installed commemorating this history. The roundabout will be finished and open to traffic by Labor Day.

Join us in downtown Sarasota during our historical season of change. Businesses are open and there’s plenty of parking. See you in downtown Sarasota! To learn more visit www.sarasotagov.com.

Kelly Kirschner is Mayor of Sarasota; Larry Fineberg is Chair of the Downtown Improvement District; and Wendy Getchell is Chair of the Downtown Sarasota Alliance.