

Musings on Memphis, Part 1

Contributed by Publisher

I spent a day with the board members of the BJCC on their recent trip to Memphis. I can see why they came back excited about developing a Beale-Street-type development in Birmingham.

The Beale Street entertainment district is popping with activity at its bars and restaurants, even on a bone-chilling winter day. It has Peabody Place, a self-contained mini-mall that houses a movie theater, eateries and retail shops; it's connected to two hotels. A \$30 million Westin hotel, where the board members stayed, was recently opened to take advantage of all the Beale Street tourist activity.

Across the street from the Westin is the FedEx Forum, which was built in 2004 for \$250 million by the local government and seats about 19,000. On Friday, a thick crowd of young adults went to the Foo Fighters concert, and basketball fans of the #1-ranked U of Memphis Tigers risked ice-slicked roads Saturday morning to watch their team beat the Gonzaga University Bulldogs. There is always something to do and somewhere to go in the Beale Street district after an event at the FedEx Forum. A few blocks away, a street car trolley (re: Mayor Larry Langford) rolls down Main Street, which is lined with a Walgreens store, loft developments, restaurants, and other re-development projects in the works.

Meanwhile, at the BJCC board meeting, Performa Chief John Elkington assured board members and staff that his group was taking positive steps toward getting financing and signing up more tenants to fill the 124,000 square feet in the Entertainment District Performa is building in Birmingham, whether or not the forum/stadium/expanded facility gets built. He was so sure he gave them a clock. Starting from Friday, Performa has 553 days to get it up and running, which is some time in 2009.

Name that entertainment district

What Elkington said he needs from them is a name for the Entertainment District (not the official name), because financiers want to put their money into something more substantial than a place-holder name. And he needs it soon.

Performa and John Montgomery of Big Communicaitons, which handles PR for the BJCC presented several names for the board to consider:

- City Station. Montgomery said the name evoked the memory of Birmingham's Central Station, which was short-sightedly torn down in the name of progress. He and Performa want to resurrect the old steel sign that stood over the tunnel running under the historic station. The sign was erected in 1909 and John thought since the District (whatever it will be called) is slated to open the same year. Seems cool enough.
- The Forge. It was obvious Elkington favored this one. The word evokes the City's steel history. It can also evoke its Civil Rights history, as people here and across the nation forged relationships across racial boundaries. The word can extend to forging an economic relationship across geo-political boundaries (suburbs and inner city), forging a new revenue generator for the entire Birmingham region. Something to think about.
- Whatley Yard. It got a brief mention at the meeting. It refers to Birmingham jazz great Fess Whatley, and plays on the Magic City's rich musical heritage.

I don't know if the BJCC is taking a poll or suggestions, but I'm sure they won't let a good idea go to waste. Why not send your ideas to Jack Fields, the BJCC's Executive Director (via his administrative assistant).

You can check out some of the other pictures I took while I was there. There's a whole lot more I would like to say about my trip to Memphis. I want to go back, when it's MUCH warmer. I think there is a lot we can learn from what the city has done. So stay tuned.