



# *John Rivers*

REMAKING A HISTORIC  
DOWNTOWN IS NOT A  
JOB JOHN RIVERS TAKES  
LIGHTLY

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Photos and Story by Phil Eich,  
Storyville Social, as part of the  
Michigan Main Street Story  
Series

“We moved here from Detroit when I was very young. It was myself, my mom and dad, and my two sisters. My father owned an insurance company when we came here, right across the street, right where the Riviera Bar is. Coming from a much bigger city like Detroit, to this city, was heaven because it’s very much more manageable. It was exciting because even at a very young age, I appreciated the idea of a small town where everybody knows everyone.

I’ve created and sold 14 startup companies. The last large company that I started and sold, I started in Denver, Colorado. I would fly there during the week and then fly

home on the weekends. Then I opened an office with that business in West Virginia, then an office in Texas, North Dakota, etc. It was a lot of travel, but my roots were always here. I’ve never left Three Rivers. I wanted my kids to go to school here. I’ve had friends that I’ve grown up with and known for 40 years.

In that timeframe, I looked at downtown. I thought it was a great opportunity and it needed a little help. I decided I was going to do some development and take a building one at a time. I wanted to help but everything still had to make financial sense. The goal wasn’t to get rich, but it did have to have a

sound business approach to make sure it stayed a benefit to the community.

I bought the first building and redid it with the idea of offering something the city needed. One thing we needed was rental space, especially a smaller rental space, and we really wanted to have a restaurant.

The plan became that we were going to start as a rental venue and transition it into a restaurant when we were ready. We started having some small events here right away, and then grew it into a restaurant.

I never really wanted to own a restaurant. My idea isn't as a developer to continue to own the place, but work to get it kickstarted. I wanted to take care of the building in a way so that maybe a young person from culinary school, or a chef that always wanted their own business, or somebody already in the restaurant business could pick it up and run with it. We'd build it so that it was nice enough and it's attractive, get lots of people in and get them used to the location, and then sell it or lease it to somebody to get them jump started.

And that's exactly what's happened.

With COVID, we closed down and lost employees, but the cool thing is we were able to establish such a reputation that we had people calling constantly asking, 'When are you going to open?' Now, we're getting ready to open again with new family running the place. It's a new business. Same restaurant, different people. We're excited about that, because they're going to

be able to jump off where we left off.

It would have been easy for me to leave it as a rental venue because I did the vast majority of this work myself, so it was a lot less expensive. I did my own engineering and my own drawings. It would have been easy to just make a little money and keep it, right? But that wasn't drawing people in. What we needed to do was start to draw people via a restaurant, and a higher-end restaurant was what we thought. So, that's what we had to do.

We made a deal. We realized if we don't find the right person, we'll go get the right person and we'll invest in them. We'll say, 'Look, we're going to sell you the business, but we're also going to finance you and fund you.'

The other thing that we had, and the biggest problem around town, was to change the perception of the people in town that none of the buildings are really worth any money - that no one was going to pay good money for two apartments upstairs.



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The reality of it is, my two renters, each of them have been there almost a full duration, never skipped a beat. Best renters ever. One of them pays me two months at a time in advance. They were paying rent that I thought was on the high end, but now we're finding out it's not too expensive for being able to live downtown.

As a developer, there are two things that I would say were most important for me with the Main Street approach: the statistics and the surveys. Those almost built my path. If I had gone to a bank and needed to borrow money to do this, half my business plan would have been those statistics.

The second thing is the fact that I'm able to find out what's working in other towns. I can go there and see it, sure, but if the Main Street program is involved, you have that data right in front of you. And our Main Street and DDA were very supportive through the entire process.

To other developers I would say, number one, don't just come in, fix up a building, make it pretty, and think you're done. If you understand what exactly your goal is, you'll better understand what you have to do to get to that goal.

Plan it out. What's the transition? What are you trying to achieve? What are you trying to give the community? "

—John Rivers, Three Rivers, Michigan



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