

## **Depot Park: A look back and a look forward**

**SANFORD** – Back in 1874, two railroads crossed in a bucolic spot in the heart of North Carolina.

The town of Sanford was formed.

And as a railroad town, of course, the train depot in the town's center – in what is now known as Depot Park – was the hub of activity. Today, more than a century later, and after sitting mostly empty and used sparingly for decades, the old depot is coming to life again as the home of SAGA's brand new Visitor Services program.

Want to talk about history coming full circle? Visitors once came to Sanford by train, landing at the depot building. Scores of future visitors looking to learn about Sanford and Lee County will find themselves drawn to the same place, to the same building, in downtown's Depot Park.

### **A jewel in our crown...**

Back in 1997, the City of Sanford and Downtown Sanford Inc. joined together to formally establish Depot Park in an effort to revisit the city's history and to revitalize its central core.

"Sanford's roots are planted in Depot Park," said Kelly Miller, the City of Sanford's public information officer. "Our city began where the railroads crossed, and our identity remains tied to our railroad heritage. Developed as a private-public partnership, Depot Park is a jewel in our crown and is synonymous with Sanford."

According to Sanford Mayor Chet Mann, the city has invested more than \$1 million into Depot Park since its inception. Completed in 2001, Phase I of Depot Park added a bandstand, lawn seating, sidewalks, fencing and lighting. Phase II, completed in 2005, delivered an interactive fountain, public restrooms and an information kiosk, among other improvements.

And the Old Steam Locomotive #12 – a staple of downtown for decades – was restored in 2013. The City of Sanford repaired and repainted the engine as well as installed a new fence around the train to ensure its preservation for educational and tourist purposes for generations to come.

### **Old building, renewed purpose**

Until recently, there was only one drawback to Depot Park: the city did not have ownership or control of the old depot building. After years of trying, the city finally reached an agreement with the Sanford Board of Realtors to purchase the depot in 2015.

The current city council aimed to protect its investment in Depot Park, Mann said, by controlling the fate of the depot building. Now, the council intends to house Sanford and Lee County's first visitor services center in the building, thus fulfilling the city's "desire and vision to preserve our railroad history while unlocking this heritage for other to share for many generations to come," according to Mann.

Investment in Depot Park has paid off. Not only has the park become an inviting destination, it's home to a wide range of events to entertain local residents and to attract regional guests.

### **New events, long-standing traditions**

The last two years have seen the introduction of many new events to downtown Sanford and Depot Park. The first Streetfest and Fireworks, held just recently, exceeded attendance expectations, with thousands of people participating.

Jennifer St. Clair, executive director of Downtown Sanford Inc., reports that more than 2,000 people showed up for the annual Depot Park Train and Tree Lighting event, a community favorite, last December. Another new event held last October, Downtown Sanford Trick or Treating, encouraged a “massive” turnout, with one business passing out more than 1,000 pieces of candy to costumed trick-or-treaters.

Summer brings even more good times. The all-new Art in the Alley started up in late April and continues through November. And the free Function at the Junction Summer Concert Series at Depot Park launches May 25 with Carolina Tradition, a five-piece bluegrass band.

St. Clair believes the city’s history is a key to the recent success enjoyed in Depot Park and downtown Sanford.

“Authenticity is a crucial factor to the success of any community endeavor,” she said. “Sanford is a railroad town – it exists because of the railroad, so to have our centerpiece be anything else would not be authentic.”

**COMING SUNDAY:** The Prelude to Progress series concludes with a look at the agencies and organizations devoted to serving and supporting the youth of Sanford and Lee County, a true investment in the area’s future.