

By KIM PARKS

“Just what’s wrong with our Square?” This is a question I have been asked as chairman of Historic Lebanon Tomorrow (HLT).

My answer is an emphatic, “Nothing is ‘wrong’ with our Square, but we must preserve its historic nature and provide a vision for the future.”

Since its founding in 1802, Lebanon’s Public Square has been a center of commerce and community for Wilson County and the city of Lebanon.

Lebanon’s Square has hosted speeches and political events staged by luminaries such as Sam Houston, William Jennings Bryant and Frank G. Clement. It’s been the site of military exercises with General Patton and his Second Armored Division during the World War II maneuvers.

First Monday Mule Day sales were a monthly event on the Square until 1932 when the State Department of Transportation shut them down for obstructing traffic.

Four county courthouses have called the Square home including the third version designed and built in 1848 by William Strickland, architect of the Tennessee State Capitol building. The last courthouse to stand on the Square, in the southwest corner, was built in 1884 and demolished in 1968.

And perhaps, most importantly, from the days of its earliest stores and “ordinarys,” the Square has been the home of numerous businesses. In 1804, a quarter century before being elected President, Andrew Jackson owned a store on the Square.

Lebanon’s Square was recognized on the National Register as a Historic Commercial District in

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1988. Although this is an important designation, it carries no protection for the structures from demolition, inappropriate additions and infill and neglect. These remedies can only be provided by local historic zoning implemented by the Lebanon Planning Commission and the Lebanon City Council.

HLT envisions preserving the Square's history while moving forward with renovations that are appropriate and relevant in today's world.

These renovations should not be generic or a "Disneyland" version of the Square. HLT aspires to capitalize on its rich history and best assets, to highlight what makes Lebanon's Square unique such as the Arcade building, the General Hatton monument and the ever-flowing town spring.

HLT has a master plan for the future of the Square. Key components are changes of the Square round-about for safety, beautification plans and improvements to the Courthouse Square area in the southwest corner. These plans can be viewed at our website, www.historiclebanontomorrow.com

Many communities are building shopping centers to resemble old town squares. Lebanon has what these communities will never have. No new construction can recreate what we already enjoy: we have our original Public Square.

It is a matter of economics and community pride that we recognize the jewel we have in our Public Square.

The renovation of the Square is an integral part of the continued economic development of the city and the county as well.

We must utilize all of our assets such as the Square, the Music City Star, The Mill, the Wilson County Fairgrounds, City Hall and the former Castle Heights campus, Cumberland University, Pickett Chapel, the Farmer's Market, Civil War sites, the Cedar City Trail system and our historic neighborhoods to present Lebanon as a tourist destination.

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Historic zoning overlays, where appropriate, must be included in the conversation about Lebanon's assets.

Cities all around Lebanon are moving forward with historic preservation projects with great success. Gallatin, Cookeville, Columbia and yes, Franklin, have recognized the economic reward from heritage tourism and renovation of their respective Public Squares.

Lebanon must take notice and not become the story of what once was and missed opportunities.

This metamorphosis will not happen overnight but it must have a beginning. HLT will continue to advocate for historic preservation and to seek funding opportunities to bring these renovations to completion.

So, while there is nothing "wrong" with our Square there is great potential within its boundaries for economic growth, preservation and innovation.