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# After two decades of controversy and struggle, tower becomes an asset

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Admittedly, David Bronner's first impression of the Renaissance Tower was not good.

"My first thought was 'why?' " said Bronner, executive director of the Retirement Systems of Alabama. "Who thought of this, and what were they thinking?"

That was his impression on that November 2001 day before entering the 300-foot tower overlooking Wilson Dam.

"I got inside and saw cobwebs and dirty, nasty windows," Bronner said. "There were birds flying around; you could smell the moldy carpet and it was hot."

That day, however, signaled a turning point for the much-maligned structure that was a center of debt and controversy since before construction started two decades ago.

During his tour of the tower, Bronner saw more than a deteriorating structure that had been padlocked and written off as a failure by many. Making good on his promise to "help those guys out up there," Bronner developed an ambitious plan to use the Renaissance Tower as the cornerstone of a tourism project that he said could - if embraced by the Shoals and its government leaders - become a huge asset to the community.

## FROM DISASTER TO SUCCESS

With a lot of help from locals and an investment of close to \$100 million, Bronner's vision has materialized into a magnet for tourists who spend millions of dollars in the community every year.

"We've gone from a near disaster to what I think is a great accomplishment for our entire area," said state Sen. Bobby Denton, D-Muscle Shoals, who was the target of much criticism during the not-so-good times of the tower's history. Denton introduced legislation in



*Jim Hannon/TimesDaily*

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Montgomery 25 years ago that produced the money to build the complex and later to keep the doors open.

The Renaissance Tower is turning 20 years old this spring. Its history is filled with, at least until five years ago, far more bad days than good.

Even most of the supporters who believed the tower would project a positive image for the Shoals had moments where they doubted it would survive. At one point, only months before Bronner came to town, the facility was closed and left for dead.

The tower's life started as a vision for an extravagant "space needle" with a revolving restaurant and a museum that would provide educational opportunities for children and adults who have a keen interest in the Tennessee Valley Authority and the river.

Those dreams were dashed when costs forced plans to be reduced and the tower to have no revolving feature.

Throughout the years, it has been home to the "Top of the Shoals" and "Renaissance Grille" restaurants. It has witnessed attractions come and go, such as a TVA museum, aquarium, nature center, a haunted house and a home office for a local company.

Today, the tower has become the focal point of Bronner's vision to make the area a tourist and convention destination. Other parts of the tourism puzzle include a four-star hotel next door, a revived conference center that was previously owned by the city of Florence, two courses on the famed Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail and a River Heritage development.

At the top of the tower is the 360 Grille, an upscale restaurant that, at last, revolves. The Florence-Lauderdale Tourism office is housed in the bottom of the tower along with the Marriott-Shoals spa facility that hotel officials say needs to be expanded.

## **TWO SIDES OF THE TOWER**

Residents know an entirely different story about the tower, one of controversy and failed opportunities.

Critics poured onto the scene when a bill was passed that provided \$3.5 million for construction of the tower. Before it was completed in 1989, the tab had topped \$5 million. When the decision was made to scale back on the proposed museum and add a restaurant and gift shop in hopes of generating operating money, the controversy exploded.

One of the biggest public critics was John Hargett, a Florence accountant who labeled the tower a boondoggle, a term that was later repeated by other critics. He said he still considers it to be a boondoggle.

"It should never have been built with government money," Hargett said. "If there is a demand for something, the free market will produce it. There obviously wasn't a demand for this. It lost money for years.

"They say the RSA project is doing well, but we don't know that for sure because the state, in essence, gave it to RSA. It should have been sold to the highest bidder."

Denton said the criticism of the tower "was probably justified in the beginning." When he crafted the bill creating the Tennessee Valley Exhibit Commission, which oversaw tower

operations, it included construction of an interactive museum on the history of TVA and energy as well as a replica of the Tennessee River.

"The board at the time went with the tower concept and things got off track," Denton said. "We never really had the museum we had wanted. We never received artifacts from TVA as promised; they ended up in Knoxville. I still think it would have generated enough operating money had the museum been built as we initially thought, but it just wasn't feasible for there just to be a restaurant on the top of the thing without an attraction to complement it.

"The tower cost me a lot of grief through the years, probably more than anything I've been involved in during my time in the Legislature. And Florence was subjected to undue criticism and actually took the brunt of it. People still have the misconception that this was a city project instead of a state project."

Exhibit commissioners, at least the ones committed to the tower, constantly fought the funding battle to keep the facility open. The 16-member commission had front-row seats to the trials and tribulations of the tower.

From the beginning, though, there was a major problem: The commission was made of a member from each of the 16 north Alabama counties under the then-Alabama Mountain Lakes Association. That made it difficult to gather quorums for the monthly meetings. Each county took turns hosting the meeting. Realistically, though, it was difficult for someone from the other side of the state to take time out to stay updated on what was happening with an attraction in Florence.

Still, a number of commission members were dedicated. Ken McFall, the Lauderdale County representative on the commission, was among the more active members. He recalls the group fighting hard for any funding in a battle against what some in Montgomery had deemed a "white elephant."

"It was a difficult time," McFall said. "We had people knocking at us from every corner, but we stayed in there.

"After we got it up, people kept telling us to close it, but that would have been a completely terrible idea."

He said there was a base of dedicated commissioners, including some from outside the Shoals, who helped. He also credits such local people as Don Ruggles, Greer Slade and Denzel Clark, for their work with the commission.

"They were just good people who were trying their best to save it," said McFall, who served eight years on the commission, including two as chairman. "We never took a dime for expenses or anything."

At times, commissioners would go into a meeting fearing they would have to close the tower by the end of the gathering. But they would find funds and pore over the budget for ways to save money here and there. During one meeting, the commission phoned the governor's office and talked the finance director into an \$8,000 commitment just to keep the tower open for one more month.

Denton went back to the Legislature each year begging for money.

"It was a constant battle to get enough money to keep the tower from being overrun by

kudzu," Denton said.

## **CHANGES TO COMMISSION**

With the tower losing money and with difficulty getting enough commissioners together to conduct a legal meeting, Denton sponsored a bill that reduced the exhibit commission's board from 16 to five. He said the new board, led by former Florence banker Simpson Russell, was a key to finding a lasting solution for the tower.

"Although there were good individuals on the other commission, Gov. (Don) Siegelman appointed commission members who were positive and had a vision," Denton said. "They tried to find something that would work rather than trying to tear it down."

The new commission solicited help from tourism director Debbie Wilson and assistant director Alison Stanfield to help run the day-to-day operation of the tower and try to restore order to the financial issues, which included \$70,000 to Florence Utilities for a long overdue bill.

"They were an invaluable help," Russell said. "They kept things going while we tried to find a long-term solution."

With the tower costing \$10,000 a month to operate, Russell and the others reviewed numerous options and even solicited ideas from the community. At one point, they thought a deal would go through that would lead to Whitesell Fasteners, a Muscle Shoals company, putting its corporate headquarters in the tower.

A local group of residents, however, formed and fought the proposal. Ultimately, the plan was scratched. Within months, all financial resources were gone and the tower was closed Oct. 31, 2001.

"We couldn't see a way to deal with all the problems," Russell said. "When what was at the time an unknown entity (Whitesell) approached us, I remember thinking this might be a good thing because it would get this facility off the taxpayers' backs.

"Sometimes the worst thing that can happen to you turns out to be the best thing. The worst thing at that time was having this sale blocked because we had no other options. But, as we've seen, it turned out to be the best thing. It made us look at other options, no matter how far-fetched."

Almost in desperation, Russell went to Florence businessman Johnny Dill, a bond agent with Joe Jolly & Co., and asked for his help in setting up a meeting with Bronner. It was Russell's plan to ask for RSA's help in finding a positive use for the tower.

Dill and Russell invited Bronner to visit the Shoals and the tower, and, as Russell says now, "I guess the rest is history."

It was hardly over, though.

## **SEEING POSSIBILITIES**

Bronner said he began changing his mind about the tower as he toured it.

"I could see someone had a vision and the tower was the first step to take this marvel called Wilson Dam and make it so people could enjoy it," he said. "Unfortunately, the idea was way

before its time. And the convention center next door was a little before its time. You just can't make money from a place where you come in and then leave without staying and spending some money."

He called the Renaissance Tower "simply unique" and said he saw what could happen when all the pieces of a puzzle come together. The pieces were the tower, conference center, golf complex, River Heritage project and an attraction at Veterans Park.

"The only towers like this that I was aware of at the time were in downtown Atlanta, one in Seattle and a couple I had seen in Europe," Bronner said. "Once you've seen it, though, what else was there to do and what else was there to make people come back again?"

Bronner delivered Russell a plan to pull it all together. It took local officials throughout the Shoals working together, though, something that was not a popular idea at the time. It took a local funding mechanism to become a partner with RSA.

Despite much debate, local government leaders passed a 2-cent gasoline tax in Lauderdale and Colbert counties and the area had the \$17 million it needed to move the project forward.

With Dill refinancing bonds to help the exhibit commission pay off its debts, including the big one to Florence utilities, the group of local elected officials overcame many other roadblocks, such as finding property to build a golf course after TVA refused to allow construction on the reservation in Muscle Shoals. There also were issues with getting TVA land to build the luxury hotel.

"When we got the letter from Dr. Bronner that outlined his plan, it seemed to be extremely ambitious considering where we were at the time," Russell said. "But Johnny Dill was persistent and kept saying 'let's go through this one line at a time and see what can be done.'

"We got the mayors and county commission chairmen together. Everyone dove in, started brainstorming and came up with the answers. Dr. Bronner stayed with us at times when it would have been very easy for him to just walk away. He said he was committed to helping us get it done and he did. For me, it was a wonderful experience."

McFall said the original commission knew there was a good use for the tower, and he was very pleased when the RSA project formed.

"I'm glad to see it make it," he said. "It's an asset for the city, as it turned out. What's tough one day is good the next day. The whole area, the tower, hotel and convention center, they look good. It's all first class. It gives you certain amount of pride to know that we toughed it out. It was worth it."

Denton said the tower now symbolizes what it was meant to from the beginning.

"It's an icon for the entire Shoals," he said. "There were some rough times, really rough years. But look where we are today. We overcame those bad times, and that tower shows everyone that something pretty remarkable took place here."

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