

# Developers rediscover downtown

For several years, all that was talked about was the move away from downtown. In 1997, Austin's central city became one of the area's hottest spots.

Developers moved forward with



**Tom Stacy**

plans to build hundreds of housing units and hundreds of thousands of square feet of retail space downtown — from the burgeoning Warehouse District to the busy hub of West Sixth Street and North Lamar Boulevard.

This was the year that Austin

was introduced to downtown lofts. Sutton Lofts Inc. became a major player in downtown residential development, with several loft projects in the works. Loft Development Co., a subsidiary of LBJ Holding Co., is converting the historic Brown Building at 712 Colorado St. into about 100 loft-style apartments.

Retail developers set their sites on the downtown area, with projects ranging from the mammoth Market Place at Sixth Street and Lamar Boulevard — which will include an 18-screen megaplex theater and a Target — to a Planet Hollywood, which is looking at several downtown sites.

Even the long-vacant Stephen F. Austin Hotel at Seventh Street and Congress Avenue was given new life this year when investors purchased the building and began a multimillion-dollar renovation.

In addition to new development, many companies moved their offices from the suburbs to the skyscrapers of downtown. The occupancy rate has risen from a low of 65 percent in 1987 to 89.6 percent in 1997.

"There's been a change in perception about downtown," Tom Stacy, outgoing chairman of the Downtown Austin Alliance, said at the group's annual meeting in October.

— R. Michelle Breyer