

Title: Pembroke rings in new while celebrating its past

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PEMBROKE - As more than 100 people watched, Pembroke leaders turned dirt Friday on a construction project that signifies a new era for downtown revitalization, the A.S. Thomas Center. The groundbreaking served as the kickoff for the town's 125th Anniversary Celebration.

"The old is coming down and the new is coming up," Pembroke Mayor Greg Cummings said.

Named after Alfred Stephens Thomas, the late grandfather of Thomas Property Group CEO Jim Thomas, the A.S. Thomas Center will be a **36,000-square-foot, mixed-use development that will feature stores, restaurants and student apartment-style housing, with a total of 34 bedrooms. It will replace the old Pates Supply storefront on Union Chapel Road.**

"About 90 years ago those building were built here and Pate Supply Company played a very, very major role in stimulating economic development, creating jobs and bringing new business into the town of Pembroke," Cummings said. "That era has passed. The new era is the present, and the present, as you see today, is going to be the Thomas Center."

Developed by Thomas Properties Group in partnership with Metcon Buildings and Infrastructure, the development is the first in a series of planned downtown revitalization projects. As part of the revitalization effort, the town plans to redevelop the streetscape along Union Chapel Road from Second Street to Third Street. Plans include new brick sidewalks, improved lighting, street furniture and landscaping. Metcon will provide design/build services for the project that is being financed by the Opportunity Zone Fund through PNC Bank.

The financing deal is the first ever done in North Carolina through the Opportunity Zone Program, said Lori Jones Gibbs, senior vice president of Community Development Banking at The Carolinas PNC.

Anchor tenants for the new space include Lonerider Spirits Distillery and Brewery, and New York Deli.

"There will be a rooftop patio," Metcon CEO Aaron Thomas said. "I think that will be a really nice amenity for downtown Pembroke for folks to relax and enjoy themselves."

The idea for the mixed-use development came from Jim Thomas.

"This has been a long time coming," he said. "I've been working on this project for two years. There's been many, many painful days."

Giving students at The University of North Carolina at Pembroke a place to go off-campus while not leaving the town was the reason Thomas, who also is a UNCP trustee, pushed for the development.

"The driving force behind this project is the lack of things in Pembroke for college students, faculty, staff and members of the community to do," Jim Thomas said. "Most people are going to places like Fayetteville, Lumberton, et cetera, for entertainment and millions and millions of dollars are leaving the community every day."

The development is one of many investments Jim Thomas has made to the town and to UNCP. He invested in the Thomas Entrepreneurship HUB, just across the street from the A.S. Thomas Center, and donated \$7 million toward the School of Business, the university's largest gift ever. This is important for the town and important for the university, and we want to capture those dollars that are leaving the community and take advantage of it," Jim Thomas said. "We will have a great downtown if we do that.

"Not only will this project create things for people to do, enjoy, entertainment but it will also create jobs. We hope this starts a transformation of revitalization of downtown Pembroke."

Robin Cummings, UNCP chancellor, pointed out that not only is this a gift for the town's 125th birthday but it also is a gift for UNCP, which turns 133 on Saturday. He said the center means that the university will be positioned for the future in a more secure way.

"In today's world, students have the choice of where they can attend college, and a critical part of that decision is the school environment, the campus, but more importantly what they can do off-campus," Chancellor Cummings said.

"I'm not exaggerating when I say downtown revitalization, starting with the A.S. Thomas Center, is absolutely vital to UNC Pembroke's success and our ability to compete for students of the future for our growth and for our very survival of the future. If UNCP is to prosper, the town of Pembroke must prosper, and they must grow together."

Although leadership ceremoniously turned over dirt for the new building, ground will be broken officially after the Pate Supply building has been demolished. Demolition will begin on Monday, Aaron Thomas said.

"This is a lot more than just a building that we're building," Aaron Thomas said. "This represents the transformation of downtown Pembroke. It's a catalyst for growth in our community and hopefully other things will come as a result of this investment."

The town will be closing Main Street on Saturday for the Main Street Celebration, which is free and open to the public. The celebration will take place from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. in front of UNCP's Pembroke Business Incubator and Calvary Way Church.

The event will feature vendors offering free food, bouncy houses, train rides and entertainment by the Carolina Music Award-winning band Mark McKinney & Co. and DJ Gizmo.

Turns dirt on centerpiece for growth

*Pembroke was a 2016 CPNI town workshop