Comedy club to debut in city

Franchise to include restaurant, lounge

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On any given week, at least eight comedy shows are playing in downtown Greenville — if you know where to look.

Café And Then Some on College Street has been in business the longest, roasting locals since the 1980s. Comedy nights are frequent at Coffee Underground and Gringos on Camperdown Way. There's the Peace Center, too, where Bill Cosby, Jerry Seinfeld and other celebrities have played.

But a dedicated comedy club, the kind that brings regular stand-up acts, has long been missing. This is where Howard Dozier comes in.

The Myrtle Beach restaurateur is opening a new Comedy Zone franchise at 221 N. Main St., in a 10,000-square-foot building that also will house a restaurant and upscale lounge.

It's a big undertaking for Dozier and business partner Paul Talley, who owns the Comedy Zone in Greensboro. They plan on investing more than $400,000 to revamp the space into a venue that would be a natural stop for touring comedians who Dozier says tend to skip over Greenville on the way from Charlotte to Atlanta.

For local comedians, the arrival of a franchise club also means that Greenville's comedy scene — a mostly do-it-yourself affair for now — could grow.

It's hard explaining to the public that there are plenty of shows downtown, but no dedicated place for them, said Jason Farr, recently named South Carolina's funniest comic.

"They have been amazing shows, and a lot of people have been missing out on that," Farr said.

Comedy might be a tough sell, but Dozier thinks downtown is ready.

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The market is good, and being located across from the Hyatt Hotel helps, Dozier said.

Comedy Zone will have table seating for 300 upstairs, where two comedy shows a night will be held every Friday and Saturday, according to plans filed with the city. Downstairs is an upscale lounge and a restaurant that will serve tapas Wednesday through Sunday.

"We look at the space almost as a smaller entertainment complex," Dozier said. "Ideally, you could have all three stops there — eat at the restaurant, go to a comedy show and then have drinks in the lounge."

Work on the new franchise will start in May and take about four months.

Dozier already has been approved for a special permit to serve alcohol after midnight, with the condition that the later shows be open only to adults 21 and older.



A Comedy Zone franchise, including a restaurant and lounge, is set to open at 221 North Main St. in the former Grille 33 location. Renovations are expected to begin in May.
MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF

Once open, the venue will carry a nationally known name that's among the best in the business, according to Leonard Kure, Comedy Zone's head booking agent.

Kure said Greenville will be "able to get pretty much anyone they want," since it would have only weekend shows.

Based out of NC Music Factory in Charlotte, the franchise has more than 50 clubs across the U.S. and the Bahamas. Most of them are in the Southeast and depend on Comedy Zone to handle the bookings and pick comedians. Recent acts that have come through the Greensboro location include Chris Tucker, Pauly Shore and Carlos Mencia.

"It has brought a lot of talent through, a lot of major names," Dozier said.

That will be key to Comedy Zone's success since the big-name acts are what most Greenville audiences want to see, according to Harrison Brookie, co-founder of Alchemy Comedy Theater at Coffee Underground.

Celebrities such as Aziz Ansari, an actor on NBC's "Parks and Recreation," regularly sell out when they come to the Peace Center, as do the local improv shows, but the up-and-coming comics face a much tougher audience, Brookie said.

Considering how new the city's comedy scene is, Farr said he hopes Comedy Zone will host amateur nights for the local talent "because there is something really special and really great here."

"I just wish more people in Greenville knew about it," he said.