Falls Park transformed the city

By Knox White



HEIDI HEILBRUNN / Staff

Falls Park has brought people to downtown Greenville including for this spring's Return to the Green Irish Festival.

Five years ago, on the day it opened, Falls Park became the "star" attraction in downtown Greenville. The falls, the public garden and the stunning suspension bridge complemented our already unique Main Street. And that is the secret to its success — the park is no mere gimmick or latest development fad; instead, it is authentic and timeless. It has changed forever how we define our city.

It is easy to forget that the project almost never happened. The vision of the Carolina Foothills Garden Club, which labored for years building a garden and park around the historic falls, could never be fully realized as long as the falls was hidden from view by a massive highway bridge.

For 40 years the overpass stood directly on top of the very birthplace of Greenville. Removing it was a tough sell. After all, how do you make a case for investing in a public garden around a waterfall few had ever seen? Add a one-of-a-kind pedestrian suspension bridge to the plan and the argument gets even harder.

Yet we did it. The result was more than just a public garden; it was a gathering place the likes of which few American cities enjoy. The park was instantly embraced as a place to meet friends and take visitors. It fit naturally into downtown because it maintained a comfortable human scale and, like Main Street, invited a leisurely stroll. Even at night the park and the bridge are illuminated in a way that complements the lighted trees on Main.

While complementing downtown, the park also transformed it by attracting dramatic new development to the river. Riverplace with its shops, offices, condos, restaurants and a hotel soon opened across the street. The banks of the river itself, which were once blighted and "off limits" to the public, became a public river walk for pedestrians and bikers. The new wave of development extended to the tip end of the West End district with a new baseball stadium and its own mix of shops and residents. All of this was impossible to imagine before Falls Park.

But the greatest gift of Falls Park — and why it really matters — is that it encourages us to open our eyes to the special assets we have in Greenville and to build on them. It proves again that people are attracted to beautiful places that are authentic. This is how we attract the most talented and creative young people to our area; how we become home to retirees and how we continue to compete for the jobs and investments on the global stage. People choose Greenville because of what Falls Park says about us.

Over the next five years, we will move up the river and create other special places for recreation and "green" development. Just follow the route of the soon completed Swamp Rabbit bike and walking trail and see the potential along this neglected "upper" part of the river corridor.

Once again, with good stewardship of this natural asset, the river can reshape our city. Falls Park showed the way.

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GUEST COLUMN

