

# 'There's a good vibe downtown'

## Jazz on the Alley returns tonight as Seneca hopes to build on 'sizzle'

**'It's taken a long, long time, but the name recognition of Ram Cat Alley is a real asset.'**

**Stuart Pohl**  
Seneca city councilman and downtown business owner

**BY NORM CANNADA**  
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SENECA — Seneca downtown businessman and city councilman Stuart Pohl remembers a time two decades ago when people were not intentionally coming to Ram Cat Alley or any other part of the downtown area.

"Twenty years ago on a Friday night or a Saturday night, we would stand outside and go 'How can anybody find us?,'" said Pohl, who owns The Spot on the Alley. "No one knew Ram Cat Alley existed except for the locals, and the locals wouldn't

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Mia Darj'de performs with Funk Factory 5 during Jazz on the Alley in downtown Seneca in 2014. Funk Factory 5 is again among the bands set to perform this season at Jazz on the Alley, which will kick off tonight with a performance by the Odyssey Band.

FILE



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come because all they remembered was the drugs and the gunfights. It's taken a long, long time, but the name recognition of Ram Cat Alley is a real asset."



Pohl

A big draw to Ram Cat Alley and downtown has been Jazz on the Alley, which begins its ninth season tonight with a performance by the Odyssey Band.

But Jazz and Ram Cat Alley businesses are no longer the only incentives to come to downtown Seneca. Since the beginning of 2018, efforts have intensified to bring more people and businesses to the area. Seneca Mayor Dan Alexander said building permits in 2018 within a mile of the downtown area represented investments of more than \$7 million in construction costs.

The city has also started incentive programs to help new businesses locate downtown and help property owners improve their buildings.

During the Christmas season, city council used hospitality and accommodations tax revenue to buy \$75,000 worth of Christmas decorations that included a 30-foot tree, lights and music with a sound system playing music down Main Street. Officials said the lights drew thousands to the downtown area.

Just last Saturday, Sip 'n Stroll drew several hundred people — some estimated as many as 1,000 — to Ram Cat Alley.

"I think the crowds are getting bigger because of the different kinds of events that we have downtown, like the Christmas lights. That's bringing a group of people that were never

downtown, that never knew about Jazz," Pohl said.

"Then you have the event last Saturday, same thing. They came down for that event, but never knew about Jazz. I think Jazz is growing organically because of the varied type of events that we've got downtown."

Alexander said downtown events have created more excitement about the area.

"There's no doubt that all the interest that we're seeing downtown is bringing more people, and it does help Jazz get bigger and bigger," Alexander said. "We're looking forward to this



Alexander

year because we feel like it's going to be a tremendous year for Jazz on the Alley and downtown.

A lot of people have been talking about the things that are going on downtown."

Seneca events coordinator Riley Johnson said increased activity is good for Jazz on the Alley, which will run each Thursday night through October.

"There's a good vibe downtown," Johnson said.

"Right now there's a little sizzle in downtown, and it's gradually increased over the years. We're adding a few things this year that's going to create a little more excitement."

The Thursday night event drew an average of 500-700 during the 2018 season.

"It's the same fun atmosphere that kick-starts everybody's weekend," he said. "I tell people you have branded an item when you only have to say the first name. Just like Mike plays basketball, everybody knows who that is. Now people ask me, 'Hey are

you going to Jazz?' and you know what everybody is talking about. That is a great feeling."

The expected opening later this spring of the Keowee Brewing Company at the corner of Walnut and Main streets on the other side of downtown from Ram Cat is expected to bring an even wider audience to the area. SenecaFest is also moving back downtown for a three-day event next month, and a second stage for music is planned near the brewery.

Pohl said he expects the brewery to increase the variety of people coming to downtown events.

"With the brewery, that's going to be a different sector of the population down here," Pohl said. "The more varied that your audience is, you're going to end up attracting more things to please more people. It's just going to keep growing and growing."

Officials are trying to respond to the growth and its expected ripple effect on Jazz. Johnson said there will be eight different vendors and restaurants offering food options at the Ram Cat Alley event tonight.

"I think everybody is excited," Johnson said. "I put a countdown clock on the city website — a countdown to Jazz. People are chomping at the bit, ready to have a good time."



Johnson

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