



Public invited to unveiling of Collaboratory

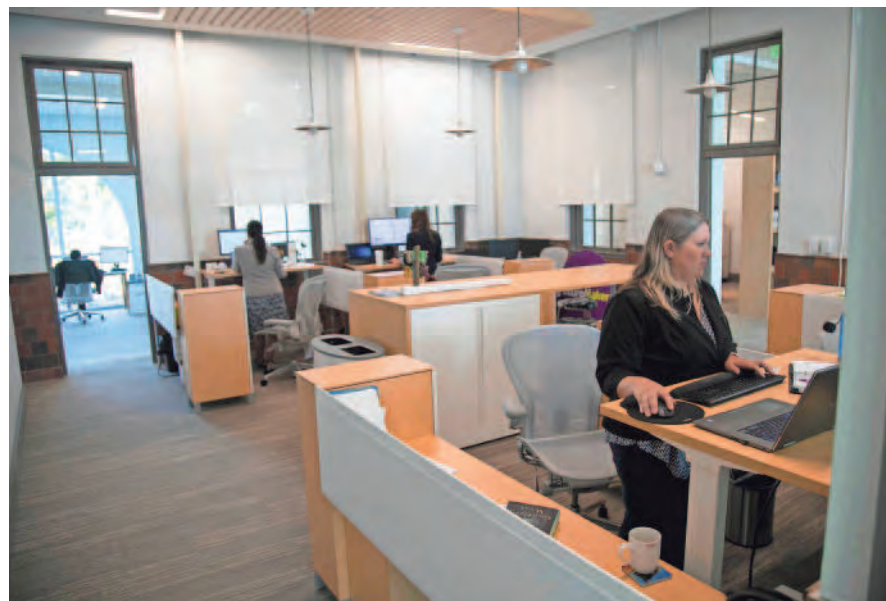
Melissa Montoya Fort Myers News-Press
USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

The Southwest Florida Community Foundation has transformed the old downtown train depot while maintaining the site's heritage. It will be open for public tours Sunday.

Named the Collaboratory, the project is the first of many public-private partnerships City Manager Saeed Kazemi hopes will begin the revitalization of Midtown and the expansion of downtown Fort Myers.

The Collaboratory, at 2031 Jackson St., is not only the home base of the Southwest Florida Community Foundation but will hopefully bring together other nonprofits and community members to foster growth and expansion in the area, said Sarah Owen, foundation president and CEO.

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Southwest Florida Community Foundation employees work in their new space in the Collaboratory in downtown Fort Myers on Wednesday.

AMANDA INSCORE/THE NEWS-PRESS

TOP: Fort Myers City Manager Saeed Kazemi and Southwest Florida Community Foundation president and CEO Sarah Owen give a tour Wednesday of the Collaboratory, which houses the Southwest Florida Community Foundation's offices. AMANDA INSCORE/THE NEWS-PRESS

If you go

Party in the Park

What: A celebration of the transformation of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad Depot to the new Southwest Florida Community Foundation

When: 1-4 p.m. Sunday

Where: 2031 Jackson St., Fort Myers

RSVP:

RSVP@floridacommunity.com or call 239-274-5900



The Collaboratory in downtown Fort Myers is a public-private partnership with the Southwest Florida Community Foundation and the City of Fort Myers. The building includes the historic train depot and a new LEED addition that includes the Foundation's regional headquarters and a shared space for the community and tenants. AMANDA INSCORE/THE NEWS-PRESS

Collaboratory

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Media toured the site Wednesday before a party at Bennett-Hart Park, next to the building on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

"So far what we've heard, the building itself fits the need of bringing people together," Owen said. "What we want to be is careful we don't prescribe what the building can serve."

"Now we know that the region is facing certain issues; we all know that," Owen said. "Things around attainable housing, water — those kinds of things, the foundation will continue to work on, but we think with more people coming to the table we'll have a lot more new ideas, and new thinking will come as well."

The relocation of the foundation offices to downtown Fort Myers began after the old train depot was left vacant following the move of the Southwest Florida Museum of History to the then-Imaginarium. That led to the creation of the IMAG History & Science Center just east along Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

"The depot was going to be sitting vacant," Owen said. "Whenever you have a community treasure, you don't want to have it sitting vacant."

Instead of creating a new footprint, why not use an old one to be sustainable, Owen said.

History remembered

The train platform opened to much celebration in 1924. The Jackson Street depot sprang into life but was shut down by the 1970s after the completion of the Tamiami Trail, which winds south through Miami and north to Tampa.

Rail service ended in Fort Myers and the depot sat empty until the Southwest Florida History of Museum moved there in 1982.

The foundation preserved not only the original Spanish mission-style architecture in the station's arches but the more complex story still written in the city's wards — the segregationist history of Fort Myers.

Engrained in the Collaboratory's floors are lines that denote where the railroad once was. They kept the station's windows, tiles, doors and the ticketing window's bars. They also kept the four bathroom doors — a stark reminder of segregation. Two for white men and women and another two for black men and women.

There are now meeting spaces that can be booked by community organizations in the blacks-only waiting room. In the whites-only waiting room, there are other meeting rooms.

Those aspects, though terrible reminders, were important for Owen as the group re-created the building.

"I think it teaches us lessons and it gives us a path — both that we want to walk down and a path we want to avoid," she said. "So I don't want to wash over all the stories in the building."

"It would be very easy to say here's a beautiful new building, but it's more than that. There are people right down the road, from Dunbar, that I want them to feel

welcomed and acknowledged, and I want them to know that we understand that we now have to create a new history together and that we have to move forward."

Owen said she hopes that by talking to certain people in the community they'll be able to get the message across to other community members in the area's diverse enclave.

"I want to be genuine and authentic in my conversation," Owen said. "I want people from all over the region to know they are welcome here, and I think that when we address things they are concerned about because they told us they are concerned about it and we say 'OK, how can we help?' That's how to do it."

Owen said the welcome celebration Sunday is one of the center's plans to reach out to Fort Myers.

"We learn by listening," she said. "We have to hear from people. I could never begin to understand the experience of a community that I didn't grow up in, that were not my life's experiences. So to me, this building is a place where the people who did experience that can come and share, and we can learn together."

Public-private collaboration

The campus is 2.4 acres. The building is 24,460 square feet, with 9,400 of the square feet belonging to the original train depot.

Under the partnership with the city, the construction included an additional 13,160 square feet of LEED-certified space, a certification for environmentally friendly green buildings.

The project was funded with a \$10 million New Market Tax credit deal, which is a federal program that encourages economic development in distressed neighborhoods.

Under the partnership, the foundation will pay interest on the loan for six years, at which point the city will take over and pay the remaining debt, which is estimated to be \$7.3 million, according to News-Press archives. The Community Redevelopment Agency will spend \$2.5 million on streetscaping and utility upgrades.

City Manager Saeed Kazemi said the street landscaping in Midtown will begin sometime in the next six months.

He said he sees the opening of the Collaboratory as an "extension of downtown" and will help the redevelopment of the area.

The vision for Midtown — an area within Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard to the north, Edison to the south, U.S. 41 to the west and Evans Avenue to the east — includes residential, retail and commercial spaces and walkable city streets.

Kazemi said the hope is that the Collaboratory, with its technological capabilities, will foster those changes and attract others, including millennials, to the area.

"The city is going to get more out of this than Sarah," Kazemi said of Owens during the tour. "We are talking about the smart city. It's going to start here."

The Collaboratory will be connected to the Florida Lambda Rail, an ultra high-speed fiber optic network that spans across Florida and has higher speeds than consumer and business broadband. This will foster faster communication and exchange of ideas, Owen said.

Students in area schools can also virtually tap into its power, she added.

Shared space

The Southwest Florida Community Foundation left its College Parkway location in south Fort Myers in May and began leasing space in offices next to downtown's The Green Cup Cafe, a vegan-friendly coffee shop on Dean Street.

She watched people meet at the neighboring café, and when her team was short of meeting rooms, she understood the need for a communal space downtown.

"It really made me understand this coffee shop mentality," Owen said. "If you have to do it once in a while, that's one thing, but if you're continually trying to find space, it made me appreciate this place so much more."

Kazemi is banking that when the facilities open, airy space will draw millennials.

The Collaboratory has a coffee nook, and in the coming weeks, there will be tables where people can sit and work. There are a number of long-term leasing options as well as rooms that can be rented for daily or weekly rates.

Owen declined to say who is leasing space but added it was a mix of nonprofits and for-profits. She declined to say how much it would cost to rent space. That information will be available after the official opening, she said.

"To me this was step one: Get the container built," Owen said. "And then step two: Help, curate, inspire and navigate what can happen in here."

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