

# Breakfast with Riley

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## Kudzu Telegraph



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Joe Riley came to Spartanburg last week for a Friday morning inspirational breakfast at the Marriot. He was here as part of an ongoing series of QL (quality of life) speakers sponsored by Upstate Forever and other groups including the Spartanburg Chamber of Commerce.

A hundred or so community leaders turned out to eat melon and quartered strawberries, drink coffee, and hear a little about Mayor Riley's vision for making a livable, successful city. It was worth the effort to find a parking place in the crowded garage.

Riley is the legendary leader for many decades of Charleston, "the city built before automobiles and elevators." He had lots of advice for us in Spartanburg, the city that blasted four-lanes through the center of town in decades past to hand the city center over to traffic, noise, and fumes.

"The challenge," Riley said about building first-rate cities, "is to avoid making mistakes." What he told us and showed us through images from his Power Point presentation is that he's not overly cautious as a mayor. He often governs and makes unpopular decisions in the face of opposi-

tion. The best land first for parks and the tax base will follow; and finally, accept the responsibility of planning.

Everybody clapped and listened intently. I kept wondering how far we had to go to keep our city awake and conscious. It would be so easy to nod off again as leaders seemed to do when they didn't even stick their fingers in the air to see which way the wind was blowing.

What Joe Riley and Charleston have done make a great weathervane for us. Will we continue to work to become South Carolina's fourth city with greatness on its mind behind Charleston, Columbia, and Greenville?

Only time, tax dollars and private investment will tell. Charleston's got history, tourism and the ocean; Columbia's got the state capital, Fort Jackson, and some big rivers; Greenville's got Paris Mountain, Falls Park and a vibrant downtown.

We don't have an ocean or a big river or a waterfall. So what's Spartanburg got? one person asked in the post presentation Q&A.

Riley didn't attempt to solve our problem for us, but he offered an observation - "hardwood trees," I remember him saying. Then he pointed out some things he'd noticed in his drive-around the night before - building the cultural center fronting on the side walk to help recover a sense of city density, Morgan Square, and Barnet Park and the Marriott, too.

The breakfast came to an end and

from those who want to pave and four-lane the road to mediocrity.

A building is supposed to look like what it is, Riley says the common wisdom states. But Joe Riley says in a city you can never say, 'it is just...' as in "it's just a parking garage." As he explained, Riley illustrated with an image of a Charleston parking garage like no parking garage we've ever seen in this neck of the Piedmont woods. It looked more like an office building, with shops on the first floor, and a great profile for two more stories.

Riley pointed out how nice the parking garage looks, how much it blends in with the streetscape. It looks like it was designed with the care we usually give to custom-built residences. "Details are so important. Same with a city."

And for an hour the clear-headed urban wisdom of Joe Riley poured forth.

Downtowns are ecosystems, so change one thing and everything changes around it; if you build on the street you honor the street; always plan with citizen input; pretty stuff will often cost no more than the ugly stuff, corners are important, lose them and the virus of ugliness spreads easily; the public realm is just as important as the private realm; the public realm includes streets, not just parks; when people are in control of a street it feels right in a city; give the citizens the

everybody went off to a workday, another day building the Spartanburg of the future. I drove past the Chapman Cultural Center rising on St. John Street and Barnet Park beside it on the ridge. I looked down off that vista and I thought about how we've come a long way in the last 10 years and we'll come a lot further in the years to come.

Driving home I recalled that my favorite Joe Riley story was about building the big park down on the waterfront. Some big condo or something wanted the land, but they ended up getting a park there and people love it. And the property values have rocketed one block off the water. It was a win-win as they say.

"Build something for the citizens," Joe Riley said. "Something they don't have to buy a ticket for."

So, here's some advice for our planners - take Joe Riley's lead and figure out how to change some things downtown that need changing, plan how to build what needs to be built. Build it pretty. We might not ever be Charleston, but Charleston didn't waste much time trying to be Savannah or Baltimore or Wilmington.

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