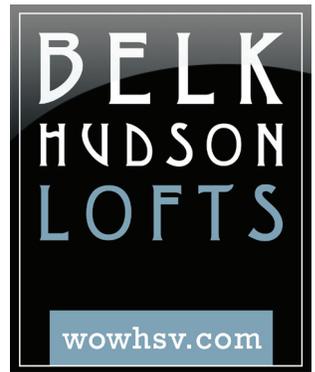


# Will lofts lift Huntsville's downtown?

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By John Peck, The Huntsville Times



*Sasha Sealy and Charlie Sealy III in front of the \$12.5 million Belk Hudson Lofts apartment building in downtown Huntsville. The 75 apartments are scheduled to be ready for tenants this fall. (The Huntsville Times/Eric Schultz)*

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama \_ Bringing more people to patronize downtown Huntsville businesses is a lofty goal.

Getting more people to actually live downtown is a loftier one.

Developers Charlie and Sasha Sealy are banking that young professionals, retirees and empty nesters will buy into the idea of moving into their Belk Hudson Loft apartments - the first privately-owned rental housing built downtown in decades.

It's a huge gamble but one that will have a domino-like effect on building up Huntsville's downtown if their business model works.

People drive downtown commerce. But commuters alone can't keep many of those restaurants, night spots and merchants in business.

Downtowns need more housing options like the Sealy's Belk Hudson Lofts.

The \$12.5 million, six-story apartment building, located on the former Belk Hudson department store site at Holmes Avenue and Washington Street, is set to open in October.

Belk Hudson Lofts will offer one and two bedroom apartments renting for between \$875 and \$1,675 per month.

City leaders, employee recruiters, and business professional organizations should do their part to push downtown living as an option. Failure of the Belk Hudson Lofts would send a terrible signal to other would-be downtown investors.

Newcomers to Huntsville probably wonder why its downtown is so proportionally small.

The short answer is because Huntsville's boom occurred in the 1950s and 60s when suburbs began to flourish.

Downtown Huntsville has managed to hold its own over the years. It still sports a good mix of retail, offices, decent homes, entertainment venues, and park space - unlike many cities whose downtowns continue to go downhill, so to speak.

But citizens have seen plans for similar big downtown residential developments scrapped in recent years, including the Ovation condos/apartments by the Big Spring Summit office building and a combined apartments/parking garage off Holmes Avenue between Greene and Lincoln streets.

Huntsville's urban core is vital to the city's economy and is what helps define a community.

Downtown Huntsville still has a long way to go. Elements like the Belk Hudson Lofts are coming together to build downtown Huntsville into the kind of thriving destination center it should be.