



# Dynamic Downtown

City transformed by a decade-long development renaissance; new convention and events center amping up the excitement

BY LORIE HAILEY

**D**owntown Lexington has completely transformed over the past decade.

Historic buildings have been beautifully repurposed, entire city blocks have been redeveloped, and new entertainment venues and restaurants have opened across the city.

The icing on the cake is a newly expanded and renovated convention and events center city officials are calling a “gamechanger” for Lexington tourism and

economic development.

The \$300 million expansion and renovation of Central Bank Center will allow Lexington to host much larger conventions, meetings and events, bringing more visitors to the region. Construction will be complete in early 2022, but the center is already hosting events in its finished meeting spaces, ballrooms and exhibit halls. It was 90% complete in October 2021.

The first event was the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League convention with more than 2,700 attendees. The Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, the

Kentucky Optometric Association, the Kentucky EMS Convention, Lexington Comic and Toy Convention and others have convened in the expanded space.

Feedback has been very positive, said Bill Owen, president and CEO of Central Bank Center.

The new center can host larger and more complex events. It has 200,000 s.f. of flexible meeting space; 44,000 s.f. feet of club and affiliated space; 100,000 s.f. of exhibition space with four halls; 29,000 s.f. of meeting space in 16 rooms; and 24,300 s.f. of ballroom with three rooms.

“And it is all state-of-the-art with LED lighting and high-speed, wireless internet,” Owen said.

The convention center is also home to 20,000-seat renovated Rupp Arena, where the University of Kentucky will continue playing basketball for at least the next 15 years. It is connected to two hotels that have a combined 30,000 s.f. of meeting space, and five more hotels are within walking distance.

## ◀ COSTUMES, VENDORS AND MORE

Thousands of fans attended the four-day Lexington Comic and Toy Convention when it returned to the expanded Central Bank Center in 2021. The convention took a hiatus in 2020 because of the global pandemic.



Photo courtesy of Central Bank Center

**◀IN THE HEART OF THE CITY** The expanded Central Bank Center, expected to be completed in January 2022, is located in the heart of downtown Lexington, within walking distance of over 1,200 hotel rooms, 75 restaurants, shops, galleries, numerous nightlife entertainment options and Lexington's Distillery District.

**▶ENTERTAINMENT DESTINATION** LexLive, a 90,000-s.f. entertainment complex across from Rupp Arena and the Central Bank Center, has 10 movie theaters, 13 state-of-the-art bowling lanes, a restaurant, three full-service bars, nearly 50 arcade games, meeting/events space and more.

“With 200,000 s.f. of flexible meeting space, the new Central Bank Center allows our sales staff to recruit meetings and conventions that simply would not fit into the old Lexington Convention Center,” said Mary Quinn Ramer, president of VisitLex, the city’s convention and visitors bureau. “The expanded space also allows us to recruit concurrent smaller meetings, which was not possible in the old space.”

Numerous events are booked into Central Bank Center for 2022, 2023 and 2024. The National Beta Club convention, a 7,000-person event, has a three-year contract with the convention center. In 2023 the Southeast Theatre Conference is planning a 4,000-person event, and in 2024 the International Conference on Missions will host 4,000 attendees.

These bookings are a direct result of the expansion, and the demand is strong, Owen said.

## Pro soccer coming to Lexington; team hopes to build stadium downtown

**T**HE parking lot on High Street across from Central Bank Center and Rupp Arena will also be transformed in the coming years. In September, Lexington Center Corp. issued a request for proposals to develop the property. Previous proposals have included building a baseball stadium on the lot, but a soccer stadium might be more likely.

United Soccer League announced in October that it has chosen Lexington for a professional soccer league, tentatively called Lexington Pro Soccer. The team owners plan to submit a full development plan for the High Street development project, with the intent to construct a soccer stadium there. Proposals are due Dec. 10.

Learn more about the new pro soccer league on page 80.



At least 10 years in the making, the project is the third expansion/renovation project in the center’s history. The expansion was crucial because the previous space could only meet the needs of less than 65% of the potential conventions and meetings, Owen said.

“Convention centers in competitive cities were renovating and expanding, which left Lexington further behind. This lack of competitiveness would have led to a huge economic loss considering total tourism expenditures at the time the project was approved were \$2 billion in Fayette County and \$3.15 billion in the 15-county region,” he said.

Without the new investment, an independent study estimated the region’s annual economic activity would drop from \$42 million to \$28.9 million at its hotels, restaurants and hospitality businesses, Owen said.

Businesses across Lexington certainly will benefit from the extra convention center traffic. The new center’s modern, airy design connects visitors visually with Lexington and its attractions. It uses reclaimed wood from Claiborne Farm, home of the famed racehorse Secretariat, for its centerpiece staircase, a new iconic social gathering space.

“Even indoors, (visitors) can experience the unique beauty, history and heritage of Kentucky,” said Owen, who will retire in June 2022. Brian Sipes, director of booking at Rupp Arena, will take the helm as general manager.

Sculptural reliefs made of wood throughout the facility will mimic the topography of noted historical sites such as McConnell Springs, Camp Nelson, Natural Bridge and the Cumberland Gap, he said.

The city and its businesses are prepared for the influx of visitors, Ramer said.

When the project was first considered,

it was determined that 400 additional hotel rooms would be needed to accommodate the larger events a new center would draw. That goal was met thanks to the rooms created by the 21c Museum Hotel, which opened in 2016, and those at the new Marriott City Center and Residence Inn.

Other businesses are prepared to entertain visitors outside their conventions, meetings and events. New restaurants, retail shops and entertainment venues have opened downtown—or within an easy commute of Central Bank Center. The University of Kentucky campus is easily accessed from the center.

“The new convention center will create jobs and attract economic development. It gives us the opportunity to market to a broader convention audience, which also enables us to showcase Lexington to more employers, who could potentially bring jobs to the city,” said Mayor Linda Gorton. “It enables Lexington to compete for much bigger conventions, and increases the number of conventions that come to town. That’s good news for our hotels, restaurants, and many other local businesses.”

The economic impact of the expanded convention center will spread far beyond Lexington, Ramer said.

“When visitors attend conventions and trade shows, they like to immerse themselves into the area that they are visiting,” she said. “Attendees want authentic experiences. When visiting Lexington, many of the attendees seek out surrounding attractions and nature experiences, and they visit other cities in Kentucky.”

## Entertainment destination opens across the street

Another long-planned project came to fruition in early 2021. Entertainment complex LexLive opened in March 2021



VisitLex photo

## Central Kentucky tourism rebounding from COVID-19

**T**HE tourism industry was one of the hardest hit by COVID-19, especially in 2020. There have been bright spots in 2021, as travelers finally dusted off their suitcases and started taking trips. But tourism numbers have fluctuated along with the number of COVID-19 cases.

Most hotels, attractions and restaurants in Lexington are doing better this year compared to last year, said Mary Quinn Ramer, president of VisitLex, the city's convention and visitors bureau.

With its rolling hills, world-renowned bourbon and storied Thoroughbred industry, Central Kentucky is a popular tourist destination, and many of its biggest attractions can easily be enjoyed while using safety measures like social distancing. The city's convention and visitors bureau has been working overtime to convey that message.

"Many communities and states have aggressively launched recovery marketing campaigns to attract travelers in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lexington must position itself to not only win back leisure travelers, but also to regain meetings and conventions," Ramer said.

VisitLex has requested \$1 million in federal recovery funds for destination marketing, specifically to promote the newly expanded and enhanced Central Bank Center.

In early 2021, Lexington received a spot on *Travel + Leisure* magazine's The 50 Best Places to Travel in 2021 list. These are cities that, according to the magazine, make for truly memorable getaways because they have "something to offer that you won't find anywhere else in the world."

Central Kentucky's many outdoor attractions have been especially popular the past year-and-a-half, Ramer said.

"Canoe Kentucky and Boone Creek Outdoors have been busy over the summer and Horse Country Inc. has been very busy booking farm tours as well," she said. "At our Visitors Center, some of the most popular pieces we hand out are our driving tour maps and downtown walking tour map."

Lexington's murals are a must-see and can be enjoyed without a lot of social interaction. Created by both high-profile commissioned artists and anonymous painters alike, these murals continue to shape the city of Lexington and are just waiting to be discovered.

One of the city's signature attractions is the Kentucky Horse Park, which Ramer said is a wonderful attraction that Lexingtonians sometimes often forget about.

"It is an outstanding family attraction where you can spend an entire day enjoying the Hall of Champions and Parade of Breeds shows, go horseback riding, or spend time exploring the International Museum of the Horse and the Saddlebred Museums," she said.

at the corner of South Broadway and West High Street, across the street from Central Bank Center and Rupp Arena.

Originally announced in 2014, LexLive features 10 movie theaters, 13 state-of-the-art bowling lanes, a restaurant, three full-service bars, nearly 50 arcade games, meeting/events space and an attached parking garage. The massive entertainment center, owned by Krikorian Premiere Entertainment, originally planned to open in October 2020, but that date was pushed back because of COVID-19 restrictions.

The first floor holds the bowling alley, arcade, two bars and five 45-foot-wide movie screens in rooms seating up to 100. Another bar and five more movie screens are upstairs. One of the theaters features an LFX (large-format experience) screen and a Dolby Atmos sound system with 150 speakers. Guests can order movie seats and food in advance online.

LexLive will complement the new convention center, offering conference-goers a nearby entertainment and dining option previously unavailable, said owner George Krikorian. He also hopes it will

◀ **MAGNIFICENT MURAL** A 60-ft. tall mural painted on the back of the Kentucky Theater in downtown Lexington depicts the Lincoln Memorial sculpture in vivid colors. It was painted in 2013 by artist Eduardo Kobra. To plan a tour of Lexington's murals, go to [visitlex.com/things-to-do/murals/](http://visitlex.com/things-to-do/murals/).

be a big hit with UK students, many of whom are within easy walking distance.

### Distillery District continues to grow, attract attention

Just a short ride—or a 20-minute walk—from the convention center is a hub of diverse dining and entertainment that has grown into an exciting, popular hotspot.

The Distillery District, located off Manchester Street, has two working distilleries, several breweries, music venues, a large events facility, an arcade, several bars, restaurants, retail shops, art studios and many other unique destinations. A six-story, 125-room boutique hotel with a restaurant and rooftop bar is being planned.

"It has blossomed and really become a destination point for the entire community," said Kevin Atkins, the city's chief economic development officer.

Among the attractions:

- **James E. Pepper Distillery**—After lying abandoned 50 years, the distillery reopened in 2018. It offers tours that tell the lost story of an iconic American brand and includes a tasting of its award-winning whiskeys.

- **The Burl and The Burl Arcade**—This restored train depot has natural acoustics and an open floor plan ideal for hosting live music by local and national bands. The arcade is filled with 1980s games and a wall of TVs beckoning you to pick up a game controller.

- **The Pepper Rickhouse**—A 1936 building listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the rickhouse once served as a bourbon aging warehouse. Its ground floor is now home to retail shops, a brewery, outdoor entertainment, a massage studio and more.

- **Manchester Music Hall**—An 1880s bourbon warehouse is now one of Lexington's premier event and concert venues, attracting mid-level and legacy acts from all genres.

- **RELIC Lexington**—RELIC is a public warehouse that features bourbon barrels, industrial furniture, vintage rugs, old signage and other oddities.

- **Battle Axes**—A popular spot in the Rickhouse, Battle Axes offers visitors the chance to throw hatchets at targets while enjoying snacks and adult beverages.

► **BOOMING BUSINESS** The Distillery District, a popular attraction in downtown Lexington, has numerous restaurants, bars and other nightlife options, as well as two working distilleries, several breweries, music venues, an arcade and retail shops.

Other points of interest: Crank and Boom ice cream, Goodfellas Pizzeria, Elkhorn Tavern, The Local Wag and Dogtown (two doggy daycares), and The Breakroom (a bar on the banks of Town Branch).

“We see visitors who only have a few hours to spare who would like to have a bourbon experience, and now we have plenty of options,” Ramer said. “Our visitor information specialists send a lot of visitors to James E. Pepper and Barrel House in the Distillery District, in addition to Town Branch and Bluegrass Distillers. Live music at The Burl and the Burl Arcade are also big draws for visitors.”

**City Center literally changed the landscape of downtown**

The beautifully designed City Center modern mixed-use development in the heart of downtown Lexington was one of the city’s most highly anticipated projects in recent years. Opened in 2019, the development’s aesthetic impact has been significant.

City Center has been called “the crown jewel” of all of the projects The Webb Companies has developed, according to Chairman Dudley Webb. That’s quite a statement, given that The Webb Companies is one Central Kentucky’s oldest and largest commercial real estate developers and has projects around the nation.



VisitLex photo

He also called the \$220 million development “a game changer for our region.”

City Center includes two hotels—Lexington Marriott City Center and Residence Inn City Center—that opened in spring 2020. The combined 336 guest rooms were needed to give downtown enough hotel rooms to accommodate larger conventions being planned at the newly expanded convention center.

The hotels share some amenities, including a state-of-the-art fitness center, a virtual fitness studio, and over 10,000 s.f. of flexible next gen meeting space. Guests from each hotel have access to a rooftop pool and sky bar above Residence Inn.

City Center also has a three-level, 700-space underground parking garage and more than 150,000 s.f. of rentable office space in the first nine levels of

the 12-story tower, with three levels of luxury condominium residences above the office space.

Several businesses have made City Center their home. Full-service law firm Dinsmore was one of the building’s first anchors, occupying approximately 20% of the office space in the tower. Rubicon, a software platform that provides smart waste and recycling solutions for businesses and governments worldwide, moved its headquarters there in 2021.

Also located at City Center are: Jeff Ruby’s Steakhouse; Keeneland Mercantile; ItalX, a new Italian restaurant by renowned local chef Jonathan Lundy; and Limestone Bank.

**The MET is a warm welcome to city’s East End neighborhood**

Another transformative project several years in the making is The MET, a 75,000-s.f. mixed-use facility at the corner of Third Street and Midland Avenue. It greets drivers as they come into east downtown Lexington from Winchester Road. The development enhances and brings resources to the city’s East End neighborhood.

A three-story facility developed with Community Ventures financing, The MET opened in 2020 with commercial occupants ranging from art galleries to retail shops and eateries, including Manchester Coffee Co., DV8 Kitchen, Carolyn’s Crown and Glory salon, The Nail Shop and Arthouse Kentucky. It has



VisitLex photo

◄ **BELLE’S BOURBON** The rooftop bar at Belle’s Cocktail House is a popular downtown destination for bourbon aficionados. On average, Belle’s has 125 bottles of bourbon, including the full line of Van Winkles, numerous hard-to-find bottles and several private barrel selections made by the staff and owners of Belle’s.

► **REPURPOSED** Forage Plant Shop is one of several interesting shops and eateries in Greyline Station, a mixed-use development in Lexington's North Lime District. The historic building formerly served as a Greyhound bus station, but it recently was renovated and repurposed as a dynamic public marketplace.

44 residential units, 30% of which are subsidized for low-income renters.

The MET connects to the wide ranging Legacy Trail at the Isaac Murphy Memorial Art Garden across the street and continues all the way to the Kentucky Horse Park.

Art Inc. Kentucky, a Community Ventures social enterprise, operates a residential development for artists at The MET called The Artists' Village. It provides living/work space for artists and creative entrepreneurs who wish to own their home and studio space in the heart of Lexington's historic and culturally rich East End. Multiple floor plans back up to a community green space that, upon completion of the project, will host weekend art fairs, live performances, art classes and musical events.

Art Inc. Kentucky provides artists opportunities to build their business, gain exposure for their work, generate revenue and stimulate cultural, social and economic activity in the community.

### Former Greyhound bus station repurposed; NoLi corridor reborn

A mile northeast of Main Street, Lexington's historic Greyhound bus station has been carefully restored and is now a destination with retailers, offices, dining and event space.

Greyline Station, at North Limestone Street and Loudon Avenue, is a 65,000-s.f. building constructed in 1928. Formerly a headquarters and bus station for Southeast Greyhound Lines and later the headquarters and maintenance

Photo courtesy of Greyline Station



facility for LexTran, the city's public transportation bus system, the building had fallen into disrepair. Local developer Needham Properties invested \$5 million to renovate and repurpose it.

Today, Greyline Station is home to a range of retailers and eateries such as North Lime Coffee and Donuts, Wilson's Grocery, Porterhouse BBQ, The Social Vegan, Rise Up Pizza and others, as well as office space for AppHarvest, RADIOLEX, Maze Law Offices and Thoroughbred Solutions. It also has a new event space called The Clerestory, which accommodates more than 350 guests.

Greyline Station hosts festivals, live music, trivia nights and other events.

Additionally, NoLi Community Development Corp. (CDC), a nonprofit working to connect North End neighbors with resources and opportunities, operates a year-round public market at Greyline Station. The Julietta Market was built to foster opportunity, growth and connection, and help nonprofits and small businesses that are trying to grow. The public market occupies about 23,000 s.f. and includes 60 small-business kiosks, 20 pop-up spaces, seven food stalls, a community art gallery, a shared kitchen, and an event space for cultural and community events.

Julietta Market, according to organizers, aims to enhance the quality of life in the community and promote continuing and equitable development. It is a space where people from all walks and backgrounds can pursue achievement and success without having to confront many of the typical barriers to entry.

Chad Needham, owner of Needham Properties, has renovated nearly 50 Lexington properties in the past eight years, many of which were vacant. Greyline Station is his most recent. Needham received the Community Preservation Award by the Blue Grass Historic Preservation for the project.

The NoLi corridor where Greyline is located is a vibrant neighborhood connecting the city's downtown with its countryside.

"The North Limestone corridor, once an industrial and manufacturing center, is undergoing a funky, urban rebirth much like Williamsburg in Brooklyn," travel writer Leslie Guttman wrote in July 2020.

A stroll through NoLi will take you to Wild Fig Books and Coffee; The Night Market, a free, pop-up, open-air market held on the first Friday of the month (April through December); family-owned restaurant Minton's; Arcadium, a bar with classic arcade games; Al's Bar; Broomwagon Coffee + Bikes; Thrive Kombucha; JGumbos; Rock House Brewing; Lexington Beerworks; Vintage Creations; Third Street Stuff; the aforementioned North Lime Coffee + Donuts; and other standout businesses.

Lexington's dynamic downtown, complete with the new convention center and the future Town Branch park installations, creates an environment in which businesses want to invest and locate their companies, said Gina Hampton Greathouse, executive vice president of economic development for Commerce Lexington, the city's chamber of commerce and economic development recruiting agency.

"Downtown Lexington has certainly changed a lot over the last decade, from improved corridors connecting our higher education institutions—Blue Grass Community and Technical College, Transylvania University and UK—to walking and bike trail improvements, the Courthouse Square renovation, and streetscape enhancements, not to mention the addition of City Center to our skyline," Greathouse said. Companies looking to relocate or expand here want to know that there is a high quality of life, well-paying jobs, a thriving arts and culture scene, and a variety of things to do after work." ●

## Lexington lodging

CONVENTION, meetings and events attendees have an array of downtown accommodations available, including:

- Hyatt Regency Lexington
- Hilton Lexington/Downtown
- 21c Museum Hotel
- Lexington Marriott City Center
- Residence Inn, Lexington City Center
- The Sire Hotel Lexington by Hilton
- The Campbell House
- SpringHill Suites

Find more accommodations at [visitlex.com/hotels](http://visitlex.com/hotels).



# Want to Invest in an Innovative Kentucky Startup?

Kentucky's Angel Investment Tax Credit can help

Reimagined for 2021 and beyond, the program spurs private-sector investment in Kentucky's job-creating companies of today and tomorrow.

The Bluegrass Means Business.

(800) 626-2930

[CED.ky.gov/KAITC](https://ced.ky.gov/KAITC)

