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## Opportunities all rise at new law school site

### U of M's move to stately U.S. Customs House means boost for students, legal community, Downtown merchants too.

By Darrell Phillips, Special to The Commercial Appeal

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Jokes about frustrating lecture-hall acoustics, low-slung blackboards and missing erasers are par for the course in many classrooms at the current location of Memphis' only law school these days. Increasingly, they precede the quip: "I cannot wait for the move."

In January, the Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law will mark the start of its 48th year in what arguably will be the most exquisite and pride-inducing facility of its kind when classes begin in the newly renovated U.S. Customs House on Front Street.

I remember reading years ago about the school's struggles to find a suitable home, to secure permission from the U.S. Postal Service to take over the building near the riverfront, and to corral funding.

At the time, it was simply another news story, another public construction project in Memphis. It dissolved into a handful of other stories about the Downtown area that would occasionally cross my radar, about projects that would start and stop, met by funding delays or political paralysis.

But this one would be different. Now, as a second-year law student watching the new facility prepare to open, I am rocked with perspective.

For students like me, the benefit of a Downtown presence is inestimable. Quick access to courtrooms, clerkships and jobs means the laboratory experience of law school is amplified exponentially. Alternatively, it creates an added inducement to members of the local legal community: Come visit with us. Come teach us. We're just across the street.

In the new building, we will be a melting pot of academicians, practicing professionals and ambitious students. Courtroom and classroom will be one and the same. The opportunities for integration are limitless.

The implications for the Downtown area are even more exciting.

I had lunch recently at a Downtown restaurant and was cornered by its owner, eager to chat about her ideas for lunchtime study space. She is right to think ahead. Nearly 500 students will be spending their days Downtown. We will need to eat.

Can the current roster of Downtown eateries accommodate us? Are there enough affordable places to grab lunch on the cheap? Will they still be open after late-afternoon work sessions in the law review office or practice for moot court?

How about housing? All of a sudden, a Downtown rental or a condo purchase seems increasingly practical. The lure of an apartment within walking distance of that early-morning lecture is a powerful one.

Don't forget about parking, grocery shopping, entertainment and drinking. These are all things students do. These are things that 500 people, now newly headquartered in the middle of Downtown, are likely to want.

Imagine Front Street teeming with students at midday. Imagine Main Street coming back to life, its pedestrian value restored by a thousand shuffling feet.

A Sparks Bureau report, produced in 2007, estimated that the law school would yield an increase of as much as \$5 million in Downtown spending. Not bad.

Finally, there is the critical residual effect to the law school itself, to its reputation and to the pride felt by its students.

In July of last year, Memphis' bar passage rate was 94 percent, 8 percentage points above the state average. Its job-placement rate was 95 percent, slightly above the national average.

The new building, as we refer to it, will cradle those statistics in a facility whose image will give them regular, daily significance.

The Customs House occupies three times the footprint of the current law school building on Central Avenue. While the century-old facade has been retained, the interior -- its small classrooms, lecture halls and preserved federal courtroom -- will be outfitted with modern technology.

The top floor will include a reading room that spans the width of the building, and will feature a wall of windows facing the river. Starbucks will set up shop on the ground floor. I look forward to studying in both.

The buzz is growing on Central Avenue. This month we were told to make sure our ID cards are current because of the tight security Downtown. Some students have begun to look for new apartments closer to class. Others are already starting to talk about parking.

Tickets for the grand-opening gala are selling in the student lounge.

For Downtown Memphis, the transition of the law school is a threshold moment. It promises great things for the city. For my colleagues and me, enrolled and eager, it promises even more.

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