

Students get technical help for downtown project

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BROWNSVILLE — Students planning a stage and other amenities for a new park in the center of town are receiving some assistance through the Appalachian Regional Commission, with a two-day workshop with a panel of experts.

A technical assistance grant from the ARC is providing the Students in Action with some expert advice from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and several private consulting firms.

“At the EPA, we have a number of programs that help support downtown revitalization. By strengthening traditional downtowns, it’s great for the economy and it’s great for the environment,” said Ed Findley of the EPA.

Christian Sese, a Brownsville Area High School student who has been involved with the downtown stage project for the past year, said the new park and stage will provide a better location for festivals and other events than the Market Street parking lot.

“Not only will it give eye appeal to the town, it also provides shade,” Sese said, noting that the Market Street parking lot can be very hot during festivals because it is paved.

Findley said different strategies work in different communities.

“There are a number of communities that have succeeded in revitalizing downtowns and have succeeded in creating jobs,” Findley said. “What we’re going to do here is tell Brownsville what other communities have done.”

One exercise had the Students in Action team envisioning the town 20 years from now. In their vision, the community is thriving, run by green energy sources such as hydroelectric power, and a performer who got her start on the Brownsville stage is about to launch a new clothing line. Sese, who has only heard stories of the borough’s past prosperity from parents and grandparents, sees nothing impossible in that scenario.

“Once the pendulum swings so far to one direction, it has to swing back again,” Sesek said.

Findley said the vision may not be that far from what could occur.

“It may not be the same as it was when you mom and grand mom were here, but it can be a thriving community,” Findley said.

Jason Espie of the Renaissance Planning Group said he has worked with communities on the comeback, including Connellsville and Salamanca, N.Y.

“In any community, no matter where you go, there are those who want to maintain the status quo and those who want to bring about change,” Espie said. “In every single one of them there is a spark. Here it is the student group.”

“Change is going to happen whether you do anything or not. Motivated groups of people decide they are going to manage that change,” Findley added.

Andrew French, executive director of the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority which owns the future park site, said the two-day workshop was productive.

“On Saturday, they had a workshop that was really getting into the nuts and bolts of how do we make this project happen, and once it happens, how do we make it successful?” French said.

French said the redevelopment authority has covered the cost of demolishing the buildings that had been on the site and have graded the lot, which now will be seeded and landscaped.

“The next piece we talked about is enhancement of the green space,” French said.

According to French, it’s going to take about \$50,000 to build the stage planned by the students, with another \$150,000 in enhancements.

“The students have done a great job in their fundraising efforts, but that is a huge amount for them to raise. We will work on that with the students,” French said.

“We’ll work with them on construction and construction management. It will be up to the borough and volunteers to manage and maintain it.”

Borough council voted Tuesday to establish guidelines for the use of the park and stage area. That policy is expected to be in place by the end of this year.