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Groups join forces to revitalize downtown Uniontown

By Amy Karpinsky, Herald-Standard
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What began as a comment about the poor condition of vacant buildings in downtown Uniontown has become a unified effort to seek and find viable solutions to revitalize the heart of the city.

As a means to that end, a team composed of directors from five city and county organizations has instituted a project entitled "ReVITALize Downtown Uniontown." The team has drawn up a tentative six-month work plan and schedule that, in the end, transfers the deeds of three buildings and secures the first tenant for the buildings.

Along the way, plans are to distribute 750 surveys to downtown residents and employees, hold two stakeholders' meetings, complete and present a feasibility study and finally move forward by securing a tenant.

The group is made up of executive directors from the Uniontown Downtown Business District Authority, the Fayette Chamber of Commerce, the National Road Heritage Park of Pennsylvania (NRHPP), the Uniontown Redevelopment Authority and the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority.

So far, the team has secured a \$5,000 grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission, and a \$5,000 allocation from another non-profit organization is pending.

Donna Holdorf of the National Road Heritage Park of Pennsylvania said the idea to come up with a solution for vacant structures in Uniontown was initiated after she mentioned that something needed to be done.

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Since Holdorf agreed that if nothing were done, the structures eventually would have to be torn down, a push began to find alternatives to simply razing the buildings. Working to put together proposals for potential uses and making recommendations is just a step in the process, Holdorf said.

"Things work best when we have community participation," she said.

William C. Long, executive director of the Uniontown Redevelopment Authority, said the team wants to act as facilitators for change.

In addition to finding tenants, the contingent also plans to improve the look of downtown by putting displays in vacant buildings and cleaning up the area. Holdorf said one future way to get people downtown is by holding a farmers' market.

Fayette Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Muriel Nuttall said the long-term goal is that "the project will be a catalyst for the revitalization of Uniontown."

Both Nuttall and Raymond Polaski, the executive director of the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority, said they are involved because Uniontown is the county seat. Polaski said the five-member team is "unique and special" because city and county organizations are working together.

Polaski said the surveys will give potential businesses an idea of what the people who are downtown want there. He said most cities the size of Uniontown thrive by having specialty stores. A captive audience of employees that venture out from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. is what downtown businesses need to cater to, said Polaski, noting that some of the surveys have identified the need for a sit-down pizza place downtown.

The area the team is concentrating on extends on Main Street from the county courthouse to Meloni's and on Morgantown Street up to Fayette Street. Holdorf said the plan is to start small and grab on to momentum and not to compete with the Uniontown Mall but to complement it.

Holdorf said the NRHPP is participating as a way to make Uniontown an "identifiable anchor" for tourists.

Recently, the National Road (Route 40) was designated by the federal government as an All-American Road, which could provide a national marketing tool for the highway and the opportunity for federal funding for projects. The National Road runs directly through Uniontown and the designated historic district.

Nuttall said the team knows that the city has an image problem to overcome.

"Since 20 years ago, the city has become rundown," she said. "The perception is that there is nothing here when there are a number of benefits and assets. We need to be proud of where we are and what we have."

Holdorf agreed with Nuttall's assessment, and she noted that the project will take probably three to five years for noticeable results.

"But if we don't start soon it will take that much longer," she said.

As a part of the plan, either an engineer or architect will thoroughly evaluate the status of the three vacant buildings that have been targeted.

The team envisions a community project. As a way to move forward, a group of stakeholders has been identified and invited to a meeting Thursday evening to discuss the project. Polaski said the meeting will focus exclusively on the

project, and members are looking for active participation.

Holdorf said what is needed is help in identifying potential uses for the vacant buildings, and the comments will be added to the adaptive reuse study. She said there are likely buildings that will have to be removed, but she doesn't believe they will all have to be torn down.

Anyone who has been invited to the meeting and has not responded needs to do so by calling the chamber office at 724-437-4571. Nuttall said the group wants to have an idea of how many people are planning to attend.

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