

# Fayette County: Redevelopment authority reels in pair of awards

By: AMY REVAK Herald Standard

A decision to enter two Fayette County Redevelopment Authority projects in a state competition paid off in a big way recently when each of the projects won one of the top two awards.

The redevelopment/community development awards were given at the annual Pennsylvania Association of Housing and Redevelopment Agencies conference held last month in Lancaster. Andrew French, executive director of the redevelopment authority, who attended the annual dinner, said he was pleasantly surprised when the authority won two awards.

French joked that he only had one speech prepared. He said it is extremely rare for one agency to win both of the top two awards.

French said the authority hadn't sought awards for years, but employee Amanda Rogers decided to enter this year.

The authority received the awards for its work on the Fayette County Business Park in South Union Township and the Stone Church Estates community development project in Redstone Township.

During the October monthly meeting of the authority, French showed the authority members the two plaques the authority received.

Authority Chairman Kenneth Finney thanked French, Rogers and other employees for their great work on the projects, adding that they should be commended.

Board member Dee John said it is great for Fayette County to receive such positive recognition.

The business park, which is now home to nearly 30 shops, restaurants and professional office building complexes, received the best practices award for redevelopment/community development and the Stone Church Estates project received the top honor for redevelopment and community development project, known as the Bellamy Award.

"Obviously we thought that each of these projects represented quality community development initiatives that had clearly demonstrated results, which is why we submitted them for awards. To receive the top two awards for both projects was truly surprising," French said.

French said the redevelopment authority had not submitted anything for consideration in more than a decade.

"The difficulty with submitting projects for consideration is that sometimes despite our accomplishments we know our work is not done. Our development of the business park, for example, has led to tremendous private investment and development, but we still have approximately 100 acres to develop," French said.

The 270-acre business park, which years ago housed the county home, is now the site of a Wal-Mart Super Center, Career Link, Fayette County Behavioral Health Administration, medical offices, shops, numerous restaurants and several other businesses.

The development, which included numerous earth moving and infrastructure work, began in 2000 when the county commissioners conveyed the vacant property to the redevelopment authority. With the investment of more than \$70 million from numerous public and private sources, the business park is now a thriving commercial hotspot in the county.

In 2008, the authority issued \$6 million in bonds to fund further infrastructure expansion and development at the business park. Supported by an \$8.1 million commitment through the Pennsylvania Infrastructure Facilities Improvement Program, this was the first bond issuance undertaken by the authority in its 60-year history, French said.

With more than two-thirds of the park developed, the authority is now planning the final development scenarios for the remaining undeveloped land, again looking at innovative ways to leverage public and private resources. Plans are under way to build a transit center for Fayette Area Coordinated Transportation at the park.

French said the site, which includes \$15.3 million in public investment and more than \$55 million leveraged private investment, generates \$610,000 local property taxes annually and generates more than \$5.5 million in other taxes annually.

The second award-winning project, the Stone Church Estates development in Redstone Township, involved the construction of 23 single-family houses for low- and moderate-income families.

The redevelopment authority partnered with Threshold Housing Development Inc., a local community housing development organization with a long history of building quality affordable houses, for the venture.

French said to meet the housing needs of low-income families in the county, 18 of the 23 houses in the development were sold through Threshold Housing's Self-Help Program. Families who participate in the program contribute as much as 65 percent of construction labor to keep the price of their home affordable. Five houses in the development were sold at market rate, creating what French called a "fully integrated mixed-income

community."

The authority worked with Threshold Housing to identify, secure and administer a variety of local, state and federal resources to implement the development. Funding sources included private financing, local Act 137 Affordable Housing Funds, funding throughout the HOME Investment Partnerships Program provided by the state Department of Community and Economic Development and funding through the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Housing Service.

The total invested was \$4.5 million for 23 houses and the homeowners invested 23,000 hours.

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