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New alliance leads downtown revitalization

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A new nonprofit organization has formed to lead the revitalization of the downtown.

The Downtown Hazleton Alliance for Progress, while officially only three months old, has been well over a year in the making.

"Before we agreed to relocate our world headquarters to the downtown, we started thinking about how our investments could serve as a catalyst for something bigger - be more transformative. And that's what the alliance is," said Neal DeAngelo III, whose family owns DBi Services Inc. and who serves as president of the alliance's board of directors.

Donna Palermo, president of the Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce and alliance secretary, said it is "a true public-

private partnership."

Other members of the board are Amilcar Arroyo, vice president; Steve Hahn, treasurer; Mayor Joe Yannuzzi, Neal A. DeAngelo, James C. Kelshaw, Gary F. Lamont, George K. Leitner, Joe Maddon (honorary), W. Kevin O'Donnell, attorney Pasco L. Schiavo and William L. Spear Jr.

"We realize that in order for this effort to succeed, we must share the rebuilding effort with all members of our community - including those residents and business owners that have been here for generations, our youth who have all the energy are seeking new opportunities, and also the Latino business community. Everyone has to participate for this to work," Neal A. DeAngelo said. "That is why we are actively reaching out to all those groups to get them involved, including Joe Maddon's Hazleton Integration Project."

Maddon said he is eager to see Hazleton, and especially the downtown, get back on its feet and thrive again.

"I'm going to do whatever I can to help," he said. "The downtown is the heart and soul of our community. It embodies so much of our history. Let's work on what unites us - pursuit of opportunity, entrepreneurial spirit, the American dream - rather than what divides us."

The idea of forming the non-profit organization started this past summer following a meeting hosted by Yannuzzi that involved a variety of downtown interest groups.

"We realized that this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," said O'Donnell, president of CAN DO Inc. "Because of the DBi and Hayden family investments, the soon-to-be-completed \$30 million Broad Street Corridor improvement project, and the willingness among groups to work together, we feel the downtown is really poised for new growth and development.

"We need to take advantage of it. But we also have to be sure we do it right. We realized we need a formal organization, a plan, and the resources to execute the plan."

That is why the alliance has decided to initiate an ambitious fundraising campaign to raise \$1 million over the next five years. With commitments pledged thus far, the alliance has already hired a full-time executive director, Krista Schneider - a professional planner and designer, and Hazleton native, to lead the organization.

Four working committees are also being formed - economic development, design, marketing/promotions, and organization/fundraising, while a website is under development.

The alliance also has started soliciting proposals from professional consulting firms to develop a strategic downtown revitalization plan that will serve as a blueprint for future growth and economic development within the downtown for the next decade.

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Once the planning study begins, the alliance will be actively soliciting community input through several public workshops and stakeholder interviews, as well as through electronic media.

The planning process is expected to begin in April and take 12 months to complete. Once it is complete, the alliance hopes the city will become a certified "Main Street" community, which will allow it to apply for and administer a variety of economic incentive programs for downtown reinvestment and development.

Even before the planning study begins, however, the alliance is already soliciting public input and ideas.

"We especially want to hear from those business owners who have had a long-standing (30 years or more) vested interest and physical presence within the downtown," said Bill Spear Sr., who is co-chairing along with Milton Lloyd a special "Legacy" committee.

For more information about the alliance and its mission, to volunteer time or expertise, or to sign up to be added to its mailing or email distribution list, contact Schneider at 570-455-1509 or kschneider@downtownhazleton.org.



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