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Hazleton would benefit from arts district


BY SAM GALSKI


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JAMIE PESOTINE/Staff Photographer
George Hayden discusses the renovations to the Markle Building and the former Traders Bank during Thursday's meeting for the Downtown Hazleton Alliance for Progress held at The Pines Eatery and Spirits.



JAMIE PESOTINE/Staff Photographer
A crowd fills The Pines Eatery and Spirits on Thursday for a meeting discussing updates to the strategic plan of the Downtown Hazleton Alliance for Progress.

An arts district would serve as a catalyst for attracting businesses and residents to a revitalized downtown Hazleton that would boast a park, apartments, colleges and a central boulevard, members of a revitalization committee say.

Those initiatives would hopefully entice some 24,000 people who drive through the downtown each day to frequent its shops and merchants, committee members said.

Those concepts, along with a facade program, planned sidewalk and street improvements and an initiative that would celebrate the culture and merchants that line North Wyoming Street, are part of a revitalization program undertaken by Downtown Hazleton Alliance for Progress.

With substantial renovations underway at the former Trader's Bank and Markle buildings in the downtown serving as the cornerstone of a larger-scale revitalization program, dozens of local stakeholders, business owners, elected officials and downtown alliance members met Thursday to preview some of the recommendations of a downtown revitalization program.

Plans are designed with the goal of getting the downtown certified under the Main Street Program, which opens the door for funding opportunities and tax incentives for attracting business, said Mary Malone, president of the Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce.

Malone and other members of the downtown alliance took turns focusing on aspects of a strategic plan for the downtown, including strategies for growing jobs and tackling vacant properties, marketing opportunities and various design recommendations for improving its appearance for the thousands of motorists who pass through each day via Broad and Church streets.

The overall plan is intended to make the downtown "a vibrant and safe place to live, work and visit," said James Kelshaw, CAN DO's director of economic development.

Kelshaw shared highlights of a strategic plan that was initiated about six months ago, saying that while the focus is the downtown core, its market area consists of a roughly 10-mile area that encompasses most of the Hazleton Area School District.

Downtown Hazleton's central commercial district and "immediate surroundings" host approximately 1,900 jobs and nearly 230 businesses. If the nearby hospital and shopping centers are included, the job base expands to about 3,500 jobs, or 40 percent of all jobs within city limits, he said.

One component of the plan focuses on job growth, which would be achieved by cultivating new and existing businesses, supporting entrepreneurship, promoting higher education and expanding and enriching residential density and cultural distribution, he said.

The committee opted to pursue development of an arts district that would serve as a catalyst for further growth, he said. Plans include converting the former Security Savings building on Broad Street into a community arts center and CAN DO's plans for creating a culinary incubator at a building it purchased at 21-23 W. Broad St.

"Recruiting and expanding higher education" is another priority and involves teaming with the existing Luzerne and Lackawanna colleges – as well as exploring the feasibility of having Penn State University once again offer classes in the downtown, Kelshaw said.

Other programs that would provide incentives for businesses that want to open shop in an estimated 12 percent of downtown properties that are currently vacant, he said. Efforts would include developing and maintaining a database of properties that are available for sale and actively marketing those properties.

Green space and "comfortable space" - or areas where people can "sit down and enjoy the community" are key to the plan, he said.

The downtown alliance has also established a parking advisory committee that would examine ways to make more parking opportunities available to the public, he said. The committee is also reviewing the concept of shared parking.

Along with parking includes initiatives geared at "improving the connection between parking and major destinations," which would involve securing funds for drastically improving the appearance of areas off Broad Street.

Malone, meanwhile, tackled a marketing component of the program.

Community initiatives such as Second Friday help to maximize Hazleton's "unique downtown brand" and have been well received by the public and businesses from within and outside of the downtown.

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Promoting Hazleton as an All American City and its Rails to Trails initiative that aren't too far from central downtown are other promotional opportunities.

Marking and promoting the different cultures, long-time businesses and heritage would also be included in the plan, she said.

"In order to put it all together we would have an official tourist center with easy-tour maps and guides," Malone said.

The downtown alliance would continue working with elected officials to secure funds for street lighting and other improvements, she said.

Krista Schneider, who serves as executive director for the alliance, shared proposed strategies for improving the appearance of the downtown. Tentative plans call for creating public green spaces, investing in the city's "historical stock" of properties and improving transportation corridors.

Tentative plans call for additional improvements on Broad Street, as well as a culturally rich business district along North Wyoming Street, Schneider said.

Wyoming Street has a "wonderful history" of small shops that have thrived and diversified over the years, she said.

Working with business owners to improve awnings, coordinating colors and using plaques and banners to celebrate diversity would turn the area into something "very positive," she said.

Consultants have also proposed creating an entry park, with trees and fencing that would compliment a recently renovated Harman-Geist Stadium and beautify Wyoming Street, she said.

Converting vacant lots into community gardens and launching a mural program at key entry and exit points of the city would "provide a sense of community pride," Malone said.

If only 1 percent of the 24,000 vehicles that pass through the downtown each day were to frequent eateries and businesses and spend \$10 each, it would infuse a total of \$876,000 into the local economy, Malone said.

Improvements eyed for the recently renovated Broad Street would include installing a "central boulevard" or grass median between Laurel and Wyoming streets, she added.

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