

Rochester Main Street has big plans for future

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ROCHESTER — A grand opening for Factory Court, the spruced up vennel linking the Union Street parking lot to North Main Street, was held last week.

Band entertainment was provided while local restaurants gave out food samples. The event was a chance for the public to view the \$30,000 upgrade.

Main Street's 16-person board, meanwhile, is already exploring possibilities for a follow-up project to advance the cause of downtown, for, as Director Mike Provost points out, it is an incremental program that realizes there is no single big fix to reverse several decades of commercial retail decline.

"We have strong banking and insurance and financial services and medical sectors," said Provost. "These are good business clusters. The retail sector is small, and work is needed to promote downtown as a destination," said Provost, adding that it is essential that the downtown area has to keep up appearances.

Provost said, "Studies have shown a potential customer decides within four seconds whether to patronize a business or a downtown. A sea of cigarette butts or a window full of dead flies can be off-putting. Dirty windows and peeling paint make a difference."

Asserting that Main Street's job in Rochester is "not done," Provost, along with his board, are exploring funding for the next three years. The current three-year funding cycle lapses in December, and last week the organization was on a city council workshop agenda to explore further local government support. The council has contributed \$35,000 per annum for the past three years, with similar support coming from businesses and corporations, and another third raised from individual donors and special events.

"If government cuts back, volunteers have to go out and fund-raise instead of doing projects," said Provost. "It would almost be the start of disinvestment in downtown all over again."

Among the projects already in the pipeline are an October Fest, slated for Saturday, Oct. 10, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. centered around the Square. There will be a lineup of entertainers and, with some streets closed to traffic, vendors and non-profits are being sought to take part in the celebration of fall.

A holiday wreath campaign is also being organized — businesses will be encouraged to order wreaths for their stores, and residents can buy them for their homes. Order forms will be available on the website www.rochestermainstreet.org.



John Nolan/Times photo Rochester Main Street's recently appointed director, Mike Provost.

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A "shop locally" campaign is also about to be launched, with residents being asked to buy from locally owned businesses because for every dollar spent, up to 70 cents stays in the local community and recirculates.

"Typically, at big box stores 39 cents stays local for every dollar spend, and if people use out-of-state online retailers, 100 percent of every dollar is gone," said Provost.

He added, "Local businesses give a higher proportion of their turnover to local charities, and local merchants are your next-door neighbors."

Provost is also addressing the problem of vacant stores in downtown.

"Empty downtown retail space tends to be very large. Eight to ten thousand square feet is too large for a small retail business. The overheads are too high for large spaces, and national chains won't use them because they have no parking lots. They are white elephant buildings," he said.

Provost also asserted that absentee landlords are a problem downtown, as they often rent "to the first person who slaps the money on the table, when these tenants may be undercapitalized."

He added that buildings which have been empty for a long time also encounter another problem — the need to be brought up to code with rewiring and sprinkler systems.

Provost said that the section of downtown from the District Court to the Square had the lowest occupancy rate.

"Step out of that area and it jumps from 68 percent to the 80s and 90s, but people tend to judge a downtown by its very center," he said.

The chair of the Main Street board is Tim Cremmon of Metrocast, with Police Capt. Paul Callaghan serving as vice chair. Downtown business people include Jenny Stimac of Jenny Wren Gallery, Mike Deegan of Distinctive Forest Creations and Gerry Gilbert of Spence and Matthew. Among the other members are TJ Jean of Frisbie Memorial Hospital and Donita Rockwell of Spaulding Composites.

There are four active committees manned by various board members and other volunteers: The Design Committee is concerned with the physical aspects of downtown; the Promotion Committee organizes special events; the Economic Restructuring Committee handles business recruitment and sales gap analysis (finding which niches are unfilled); and the Outreach Committee deals with fundraising, communications and the forming of partnerships.

Provost estimates there are 40 to 60 volunteers involved in the Main Street Program.

Commenting on the likelihood of city government's continuing support, Provost surmised that the City Council will see the value of the program.

City Councilor Sandra Keans said that Provost had come to Rochester with a strong resume of work in other communities. Her political instinct was that the city would consider continued support at the same level.

"If it wasn't for Main Street and the Shoes (an Art Esprit project), there wouldn't have been much happening in Rochester this year," she said.