

Efforts in the Main Street area to begin with old bank building; 'The opportunity to create magic here'

By Katie Martin
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Mount Airy officials showed off the town's Main Street yesterday to Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele, hoping to impress him with their plans for redevelopment and eventually gain financial support from the state.

Mayor James Holt and council members escorted Steele down Main Street as they discussed their visions for revitalizing downtown Mount Airy.

"You have the opportunity to create magic here," Steele said after the tour. He spoke to officials inside the former F&M bank on the corner of North Main and Prospect streets, one of the town's first restoration projects.

The former bank building, which dates back 100 years, will be restored and is considered the catalyst for revitalizing the downtown area, said Rob Scranton, president of Catonsville Homes, the firm renovating the building. Scranton unveiled his plans Monday night at the town's Planning Commission meeting.

He said shops, restaurants, offices and a two-level parking garage will be created within the bank building, and it will also increase pedestrian traffic. Construction is expected to begin next year, he said.

Town Council President John Medve called Scranton's plan an "economic engine."

"We have some great businesses downtown, and this will augment the diversity that we've got going there now," he said.

Steele stopped at several businesses along Main Street and talked with owners. After cutting a green and white ribbon for the grand opening of Simon Place, Steele was the first to sign his congratulations in the guest book for the small antique and collectibles store.

He also visited the Century Store Museum, once a general store. Owner Howard Parzow hopes to open it by January. Steele showed particular interest in an antique one-cent slot machine, part of Parzow's private collection.

"I love the slot machine," said Steele, standing next to the antique. "Take this picture for the governor."

There are about 30 businesses in the downtown area, said Amy Lubick, president of the Mount Airy Main Street Association.

About 50 percent of the businesses are owned by women, Medve said.

Mount Airy was designated a Main Street community in April, joining Westminster, Taneytown and 13 other towns across the state in the Main Street Maryland program.

Since 1998, the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development has recognized communities committed to strengthening their downtown business areas. The state agency provides funding for the towns to improve the economy and appearance of their traditional Main Streets.

The Main Street recognition "puts us in the spotlight and has drawn more businesses to the area," said Joanne Sapp, owner of Deja Vu, another new shop on Main Street that Steele visited.

Westminster, which was recognized in 1999 as a Main Street community, created 30 jobs and had 18 new or expanded businesses on Main Street over the past year, according to Main Street Maryland monthly reports.

The designation makes Mount Airy eligible for state grants to fix up the downtown.

"We want to show the lieutenant governor what we plan to do with his money," Holt said.

Judy Simon, owner of Simon Place, said she hopes "Mount Airy becomes more historic. I want to see the power lines buried and the sidewalks made beautiful."

Steele's visit follows a commitment he made at the 2004 Maryland Municipal League Convention to visit municipalities across the state, Medve said.

"I look forward to coming back once [the bank building is] done and getting a bite or two at a restaurant that I think you are going to have," Steele told town officials.

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