

Survey results guide next steps in effort to revitalize downtown

By **Chloe Forbes**

MEADVILLE TRIBUNE

A downtown revitalization effort known as Make It Meadville is ready to take its next steps, but first it must decide what Meadville's identity is. Recent survey results could help determine that.

During a public meeting Feb. 29, residents and local stakeholders learned that a steering committee had been working behind the scenes to organize sustainable redevelopment plans for downtown Meadville.

Allegheny College, in collaboration with the city of Meadville, received a \$155,000 grant from the Richard King Mellon Foundation in Pittsburgh. The funds were used to hire consultants to guide strategic planning and establish a community redevelopment corporation (CRC).

Upon hearing possible ideas to make Meadville a thriving metropolis again, meeting attendees brainstormed about what brought them to the area and kept them here, and what could be improved. Afterward, the dialogue was opened to the public as residents were invited to take an online survey.

In total, 325 people responded to the survey, which remained open until March 22. Of those respondents, 68 percent believe Meadville needs a CRC focused on downtown.

Andy Walker, Allegheny's executive director of economic, civic and community engagement, noted that the survey was not scientific or comprehensive. Still, advisers were able to gain insights about the community's priorities.

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Survey

Continued from Page A1 Almost 70 percent of respondents indicated they visited downtown either every day or several times a week. Regarding parking, a majority of respondents (about 63 percent) said parking was either adequate or they didn't have an issue with it at all.

In a multiple-choice question regarding types of businesses that downtown needs, the highest responses were recorded for restaurants and clothing stores. Coming in close after were specialty retail, home goods and boutiques.

The report also notes that additional surveys should be performed.

Early on, Make It Meadville engaged Tom Hardy, a Pittsburgh-based consultant who has experience in redevelopment efforts, as well as Amy Murdoch, an

have today," Walker said.

Autumn Vogel, a member of the steering committee and Meadville City Council, agreed.

"While there are lots of efforts that benefit our downtown, no one is waking up every morning thinking about the good of the whole downtown. People want the city to play that role, and we just don't have the bandwidth or resources," she said. "The fact that this opportunity is coming with some financial support is a big deal and an opportunity that we should seize."

The Richard Mellon Foundation has decided to fund early efforts to establish a CRC and get projects off the ground and running.

Looking at successful redevelopment efforts around the country, the foundation found that thriving landscapes have thriving communities, especially in college towns.

Erie-based consultant. They set the groundwork for how the steering committee should manage its time together and analyzed Meadville's current landscape. Then, Urban Development Advisors, represented by Tom Eitler and Tom Murphy, took on the task of advising the committee on creating a CRC.

Upon seeing the survey results, Eitler and Murphy confirmed that the city has a lot of potential, but one of the things it needs most is a cohesive identity that it can market.

Christine Yamrick, owner of Chateau Christine and member of the Meadville Independent Business Alliance (MIBA), agreed that branding Meadville should be a high-ranking priority. She said every storefront is filled, and there's a lot of energy downtown, so spreading that message would be beneficial.

"As a business owner and property owner, we want to see a focus on maybe more advertising and more branding as a collaborative effort," Yamrick said. "That would bring more people to the community — to eat, play, shop and stay."

Heather Fish, owner of Hatch Hollow and member of the Make It Meadville steering committee, hopes the initiative helps others see Meadville as she does.

"I hope that it could help us articulate our identity as a small downtown and market ourselves as a place worth staying in/investing in/coming to, as I and many others have," Fish said.

Walker admitted he hadn't given much thought to the marketing aspect previously. However, as city manager for seven years, he became acquainted with other developmental attempts downtown.

MIBA's Experience Meadville effort coordinates events that showcase downtown, while the countywide economic development agency and city's redevelopment authority focus on replenishing and expanding the tax base.

On top of that, the CRC would have the capacity and expertise to leverage tax credits and grants to carry out projects beyond a tax standpoint.

"If there's a streetscape project, you need an organization that's managing and going after the funding, going over the contracts — which is probably a capacity that the city doesn't

The symbiotic relationship between the college and the city to drive more people to town lends itself to a great deal of investment in the city's redevelopment.

In the end, the CRC will be a 501©(3) organization that has its own board and is a separate entity from the city and college. Until then, Walker remains the convener of efforts to ensure this opportunity doesn't fall through the cracks.

As far as next steps, Make It Meadville is preparing to create the CRC's inaugural board of directors. The advisers recommended a broader representation, including people from real estate, business, historical preservation, performing arts and more.

Elisabeth Smith, CEO and president of Acutec Precision Aerospace, would like to see the board bridge previous gaps.

"I'm encouraged by disparate people coming together across political or historical divides in recognition that they share a passion for Meadville and improving our community," she said. "I'm seeing folks come together and intentionally work inclusively with vocal critics to inform, invite feedback and ultimately move forward."

Walker hopes to have funding applications to the Mellon Foundation by mid-June or early July. He said building on the momentum and initial excitement is imperative to drive productivity.

The CRC's focus at the beginning will primarily be on the downtown business corridor. Walker said it can be difficult to maintain enthusiasm and motivation after a period of time, so the small area makes it more feasible for the CRC to generate a few noticeable "early wins" to keep the community engaged.

To see a full report on the survey's results, visit makeitmeadville.org.

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