

Group retools to promote city, county

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By Johnathan C. Ryan - Staff Writer

See Lancaster was presented as the city of Lancaster's official marketing agent Thursday during a reception at the old Springs House.

See Lancaster, formerly known as Main Street Lancaster, is a nonprofit group working to illuminate the county's historical and commercial niches for tourists and residents alike.

City Councilman Bill Sumner was excited Thursday about the city's most committed public/private partnership for marketing the area to date.

"For quite some time, the city has tried, and this is the first time we're this far along," he said.

The event, complete with hors d'oeuvres and piano music rippling through the Springs House, came about almost three months after City Council unanimously approved the group as the city's chief marketer. Since then, the group has been busy prioritizing a broad range of plans aimed at better marketing existing attractions and creating new ones.

Nancy Howell, the group's interim director, said it's working on plans for Friday at Last, a warm-weather concert series starting in May; a brochure that will highlight 10 area businesses; a group Web site and an audio tour of local points of interest for tourists. Howell and the board are also eager to move forward on a county visitors' center that will also serve as the group's main office.

The group's board met with more than 30 prominent county residents last week to brainstorm ideas for the Red Rose Festival, a county celebration of art and culture scheduled for May 2006.

The group evolved from Main Street Lancaster, a program in the 1980s to revitalize Lancaster's downtown for historical and economic purposes.

The concept was expanded to the entire county with the program's name change to See Lancaster in October 2004, when Howell was named interim director.

Howell worked for more than 20 years with Main Street as one-time president and board member, but realizes that other places in the county will have to also be marketed for the area to reach its full economic and cultural potential.

"Main Street is the heart and soul of the county," Howell said. "The three incorporated cities, Lancaster, Kershaw and Heath Springs are where we have our historical beginnings."

Lancaster City Administrator Steve Willis said the group is developing a business plan based on the marketing/promotional suggestions found in the Charette, a handbook from Community Builders that outlines how the city can better promote itself.

The handbook was the result of Community Builders \$22,000 study pinpointing potential resources and recommending methods for urban planning.

Willis said Community Builders' suggestions have helped cities across the state generate greater tourism and local commerce.

The Charette calls for a continued focus on downtown Lancaster, based on the Main Street model, but also calls for including the greater community and county as well.

City Councilman John Howard said the city wants the group to take that approach.

"The surrounding community and rest of county have a lot of historical and commercial significance, just like the downtown area," said Howard, who also said he is pleased with the group's diverse 15-member board, which represents different parts of the city and county.

"The group will really have to market Lancaster County as a whole," Howard said.

While the city has paid for much of the group's start-up costs, Howard feels other funding sources are needed to make the all-inclusive approach work.

"To make the current approach a success, ideally we'll have funding from the county and business community," he said. "It would be nice to have the city commit a third, the county commit a third and the business community commit a third."

Willis said the city has been such a financial catalyst for the group because most of the county's service-related businesses, such as hotels and restaurants catering to tourists, are in the city.

Howell met with county officials last week to discuss whether the county could complement the city's support in its upcoming budget.

"The county will play a small financial role," said County Councilman Jack Estridge on Thursday. "We should be able to get something together this year."

City Finance Director Jim Wilson said the group has been allotted \$41,400 this fiscal year, all from downtown reserve funds.

Elaine Adkins, the group's chairwoman, said most of the downtown reserve money is still on hand, as is the money raised by the group's ornament and shirt sales.

Some money has been spent on start-up expenses, such as office supplies and equipment, telephone costs and the salary of interim director Howell, which is about \$2,000 a month.

In June and November 2004, Main Street Lancaster received hospitality tax grants of \$7,000 for its Corridor 10 brochure showcasing 10 downtown businesses - Special Gifts, Magnolia Books, Charley's Cafe and Catering, Annette's Hallmark, East Coast Experience, Lancaster Opera House, CB's, Old English Interiors, L&C Railroad & Museum and Purple Rooster - and \$4,500 for Friday At Last.

See Lancaster inherited those projects and their grant funds, which can only be used for the two projects.

Howell said the material for the Corridor 10 brochure is being compiled and acts have been booked for Friday at Last.

Board member Mary Reimers was enthusiastic Thursday about the band Whirled Beat being slated to perform at the concerts, which she said is known for its eclectic blend of jazz and rock.

The group members are dissecting the Charette and sharing their diverse viewpoints about how the county can become a bona fide tourist destination, rather than just a stop along the way.

"We are really in planning mode right now," Adkins said. "We are still looking through the Charette and prioritizing what it says. It's a wonderful road map."

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