City's downtown charts new path

Travelers Rest seeing results from investment in improvements

By Angelia Davis
STAFF WRITER
adavis@greenvillenews.com

TRAVELERS REST — Downtown Travelers Rest is not the same as Mark Griffin remembers it nine years ago and he's excited about the change.

The city's Main Street is undergoing a nearly $4 million transformation that has already narrowed a portion of Main Street (U.S. 276) from four lanes to two with designated turn lanes.

The street is also lined with new sidewalk and streetscapes, decorative lighting, on-street parallel parking, pocket parks with benches, and a water feature.

Landscaping and synchronized traffic signals are also planned.

Already, Griffin said, the revitalization work gives Travelers Rest a sense of place. The Travelers Rest native who has helped cities in other states revive their downtowns, said the work in Travelers Rest is one of the best examples he has seen in terms of bringing private and public funds together and seeing the implementation come to fruition.

He said the city now has something no other community has — the Swamp Rabbit Tram Trail coming through its downtown and the Travelers Rest High School, the county's recreation complex, a major outdoor retailer and an arty coffee house (Leopard Forest) all on the trail.

"I can really see it (downtown) being more of an infill area like Hendersonville now because that's how it starts," Griffin said.

"From a small business growth standpoint, the sky is the limit now and from a real estate development standpoint, the sky's the limit."

City leaders have said a goal of the revitalization project is to attract new businesses and more foot traffic to the city's downtown.

The revitalization and a new park at South Main and Old Buncombe Road will be dedicated on Jan. 21. The Greenville County Recreation District, the Greenville Hospital System and local business owners are among those who partnered with the city for the project.

Travelers Rest City Administrator Dianna Turner called the revitalization a "perfect storm" of things happening, including the city's implementation of local hospitality and accommodation taxes and grant proceeds to pay for the work. At that time, the Swamp Rabbit Tram Trail was being discussed.

"There had already been years of prior planning for the downtown revitalization and all those things coming together at the same time," she said. "And, of course, we had the right people on council to push this through."

An economic development study done for the city in 2003 by Arnett Muldrow & Associates that showed $47 million spent each year by residents in and near Travelers Rest was leaking outside the city "got us moving," said Councilmember Rebecca

See GROWTH on page 3E



OWEN RILEY JR. / Staff

From left, Realtor Mark Griffin, Travelers Rest City Administrator Dianna Turner and Councilwoman Rebecca Crown review plans for the city's new streetscape.

GROWTH

FROM PAGE 1E

Crown.

She said several council members are old enough to remember when Travelers Rest had a vibrant business community on Main Street.

"Just because we haven't lived it doesn't mean it didn't exist, and even if it didn't, that doesn't mean we shouldn't strive to develop it and make it happen for the future," she said.

City officials have targeted U.S. 25 for national retailers, while reserving Main Street for small, unique stores.

Turner said some people don't understand that the hospitality taxes paying for the revitalization has to be expended on tourism-related items.

"We can't go feed the hungry with that money," she said. "But by spending that money and making this investment, it is going to help solve some of those other problems. It is going to provide a business climate so those people can have jobs. It all fits together."

The promise of change and messy construction areas that often come with a major project has had a lot of negativity surrounding the revitalization, Turner said.

Now that people have something they can see, "they're very excited about it," she said.

The project has allowed corrections to safety problems at several intersections on Main Street, including the addition of a left turn lane for traffic coming from McElhaney on Main Street and the removal of a hump on Roe Road.

Some building owners have even been inspired to spruce up their properties.

"I'm hoping more people will follow suit and then you move on to the next level which is buying of some of the vacant property and redeveloping it," she said.