

THE DISPATCH

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Blairsville residents express thoughts on historic preservation

By Gina DeFavero

BLAIRSVILLE DISPATCH

Friday, November 12, 2010

When Blairsville Borough was named a Preserve America Community in 2008, it paved the way for the town to apply for and earn a \$5,000 grant to further continue the community's aim to protect the historic buildings and sites that it has celebrated for generations.

The grant, funded through Preservation PA, the state organization that administers Preserve America funding, was applied to the incorporation of a Historic Preservation Action Plan.

The leading consultant for the plan, T&B Planning, conducted a public input meeting last Thursday to learn what residents of Blairsville would like to see in the way of historic preservation.

Several in attendance voiced concern about the path the town has taken in the past in regards to preserving its history.

Marna Conrad, a Blairsville resident, said she's been disappointed in the number of historic buildings that have been torn down over the years, in particular the old Blairsville Savings & Trust bank building, which was located where Sheetz now stands.

"I believe 80 percent of the good stuff is gone," Conrad said. "And I believe everything we have left should be saved. If you tear it down, you're not going to get it back."

Laura Hawkins, Greenway coordinator with the Allegheny Ridge Corporation was also in attendance, and suggested placing more plaques and directive signs around sites in town that no longer exist, or that contain glimpses of the past. She cited concrete "steps that go nowhere" by the Conemaugh River -- what could be the remnants of homes that were wiped out by the flood of 1936 and subsequent flood control plan.

Hawkins also suggested not placing all the historic preservation concentration on buildings and structures.

"The landscape is part of the history, especially in Blairsville," she said.

Tracy Zinn, principal planner with T&B Planning, suggested bolstering and enforcing the borough's building ordinances, which should provide incentives for private property owners to maintain properties or face borough disciplinary action.

When the question was posed to the audience of what Blairsville has to offer tourists in the way of historic sites, buildings and interests, the town's links to the Underground Railroad were mentioned at length, in particular the Blairsville Underground Railroad History Center located on South East Lane in the old Second Baptist Church building.

Conrad noted the center has had tourists from as far away as Ohio and Washington, D.C.

According to Robyn Barber, project planner with T&B Planning, Blairsville already has two structures that have been named to the National Register of Historic Places -- St. Peter's Episcopal Church on West Campbell Street, and the old Blairsville Armory on Walnut Street.

But according to Barber, the town has a lot of other buildings that are eligible for the designation.

Barber pointed out that having a designation on the National Register of Historic Places does not mean that the structure is protected, but it does help draw interest for tourism and it assists in the procurement of funding.

What plans to follow?

T&B Planning has determined several themes for Blairsville's Historic Preservation Action Plan. Some of those themes include: the historic downtown districts, in particular Walnut and Market streets; the railroad and industrial districts; transportation and pathways, including local trails and the canal; the Underground Railroad and Pathway to Freedom center; and residential architecture.

The historic preservation plan's goal is to help maintain the character of the community, while guarding the future of its historic resources.

Barber pointed out, "That does not mean that everything old is saved. If something is destroyed or removed, its replacement should have a complementary character."

According to Barber, heritage tourism is the second largest tourism industry in Pennsylvania, with the most popular heritage tourism draws being historic downtown districts, followed closely by battlegrounds and forts.

Several people in the audience mentioned that the Blairsville Cemetery has been a point of interest, for the community as well as out-of-towners.

"It's a neat old cemetery," Conrad said.

Susan Miller, vice president of the Blairsville Area Historical Society, noted, "We've had a lot of people coming to town for genealogical studies. We direct a lot of people out to the cemetery in the spring, summer and fall."

Carolyn Yagle, an associate with another borough planning consultant, Environmental Planning and Design, said market analyses that were conducted for Blairsville and its surrounding areas indicated an overabundance of

automotive-oriented stores and sporting goods stores, while areas that were lacking in the community included clothing, electronics and appliances and bookstores.

Those in the audience voiced their concerns about several other issues in the Blairsville community, among them parking and pedestrian safety.

EPD's study of the town found that Blairsville's downtown area boasted 43 parking areas. But according to the study, which was conducted before the sewage line construction project interrupted the flow of traffic of through town, only 20 percent of that parking is used on an average Saturday, and that number grew slightly to 32 percent on an average Tuesday.

Yagle did point out that the parking study is not fully completed, and another round of analysis is planned for sometime early next year.

Diane Messenger, who operates Blairsville News, a newsstand and gift shop on East Market Street, cited a problem of business owners and employees often taking up prime parking spots in front of their own businesses. "It takes out customer parking," she stated.

An Historic Preservation Action Plan survey can be taken online through Nov. 19 at www.surveymonkey.com/s/Blairsville_Historic_Survey. Paper copies of the survey are available by request through the borough municipal building by calling 724-459-9100.

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