

Program designed to help cities revitalize downtowns

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Morgan County Historic Preservation Society President Joanne Stuttgen, left, and Martinsville Grant Writer Sharyn Kersey, right, accept the Indiana Main Street designation from Lt. Gov. Becky Skillman on Dec. 16. Submitted photo.

MARTINSVILLE

1Morgan County Historic Preservation Society President Joanne Stuttgen said the initiation of Martinsville into the Main Street program should be beneficial for Martinsville's downtown.

"I think it's finally going to be that coalescent organization for Martinsville," she said. "Before, it was just individuals and other people doing this and that."

Shae Young, the program manager for Indiana Main Street, said being accepted into the Main Street program will enable Martinsville to apply for Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs (OCRA) grants and open the city up to several valuable, free services.

"There's no cost for communities," she said. "This is something that the state has as a resource for communities."

Young said the state created the program for all cities and towns wishing to revitalize their downtowns in 1986, more than a decade after downtowns across the nation began to see customer traffic migrate toward malls and shopping centers.

What the state realized, she said, was that downtowns had limited resources to compete, and according to the Indiana Main Street Web site, "the downtown business district plays a crucial role in the overall image of a community."

The program "gives them more options," she said, adding that any community can apply.

One resource — the highly competitive Downtown Enhancement Grants — pays up to \$20,000 to help fund projects such as promotional campaigns, program branding, façade renovations or rehabilitations, the establishment of revolving loan funds specific to Main Street activities and other related initiatives, Young said.

“It’s just what the community thinks would be a better fit for them,” she said.

Stuttgen said the local Main Street program, which is being called Rediscover Historic Martinsville until the organization committee formally adopts a name, may apply for a downtown enhancement grant at some point, but the organization is currently focused on leading the application process for a \$50,000 OCRA Community Focus Fund grant.

She said the organization will use the funding, if the application is accepted, to plan the revitalization of Martinsville’s downtown with the help of a hired consulting firm. She said the city must be the applying agency and that the city council must allow the application, which will require a 10 percent match. Stuttgen said that match will be shared by six community partners. The economic restructuring committee of the organization has taken the lead on the application, she said.

“We will be going to (the city council) in the near future,” Stuttgen said.

Young said other resources available to Rediscover Historic Martinsville are the program’s building site locator database, its technical assistance program and workshops and training session opportunities. The database lists historically important buildings that need help being marketed, and the technical assistance program uses graduate students from Ball State University to provide technical assistance to participating Main Street communities, she said.

Indiana Main Street uses a four-point approach to revitalizing downtowns: design, organization, promotion and economic restructuring. Stuttgen said Rediscover Historic Martinsville has committees in place for each approach. These committees have already taken on one or more projects since November, she said.

“It takes all these different approaches. ...It’s just going to be this multi-faceted, multi-phased approach,” she said.

Another key cog of the Main Street program is enabling communities to communicate with each other to research solutions to current problems, Stuttgen said.

“That kind of sharing has already happened,” she said.

Martinsville residents will likely see some of the fruits of this organization’s labor in the next few months, she said. Stuttgen said that, along with applying for the OCRA grant, the committees will be bringing more festival events to downtown, expanding existing events, possibly initiating a farmer’s market and improving the appearance of downtown.

Residents are encouraged to attend meetings or submit ideas, Stuttgen said.

“This is by no means an exclusive club,” she said. “It’s going to take a village. It’s going to require a long, sustained effort over many, many years.”

Any resident wishing to participate in the tentatively-named Rediscover Historic Martinsville initiative may call Jamie Thompson at 765-342-8110 or Sharyn Kersey at 765-342-2861. For more information, visit the Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs Web site at www.in.gov/ocra/2364.htm.