

Revitalization gets a public hearing

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Ben Rawlins discusses landscaping and beautification issues with local residents and business owners Monday during a meeting on revitalizing Martinsville's downtown area. Photo by Traci Moyer.

MARTINSVILLE

Standing at the edge of several groups that had gathered over city maps and planning material, Sam Neal listened intently to the discussions about ways to stimulate the downtown Martinsville area.

"I think Martinsville needs its own unique shopping to draw people," Neal said quietly after stepping away from the group gathered before him. "Things you aren't going to find at the big box stores."

Neal, who has owned Hometown Transmission, 77 W. Morgan St. in Martinsville since 1982, was one of more than 50 people who attended a meeting Monday night at the Art Sanctuary to discuss revitalizing the city's downtown area.

In December, the city was awarded a \$50,000 Community Focus Fund grant to pay for the planning phase of a downtown revitalization effort. The money will be used to evaluate landscaping and visual improvements, building repairs and facades and a marketing/branding study.

Neal said he approves of the efforts taken by the city and Rediscover Historic Martinsville to improve the downtown area, saying it will be good for Martinsville, downtown merchants and visitors.

"Martinsville is a wonderful town and it has its own unique flavor," he said.

In the more than two decades Neal has been located on Morgan Street, he said he has seen the importance of making a visual impact, promoting downtown events and having committed businesses, but he said the focus needs to be on all of the aspects of the revitalization effort.

"I don't think one thing will do it," Neal said. "Martinsville needs to be attractive, but there has to be something there too."

Neal said businesses have ventured away from downtown Martinsville because of the empty storefronts and overall appearance of the area.

"People became afraid of our downtown and part of it is because it looks shabby, but they also don't want to be in a building where the building on each side is boarded up," Neal said.

Martinsville Mayor Phil Deckard attended Monday's meeting and was surprised by the number of people in attendance.

"There seems to be a lot of interest," Deckard said. "I just hope it becomes productive. It's exciting."

Some of the suggestions collected for the street landscaping included hanging baskets, window baskets, improvements to the alleyways, goldfish ponds, flowering trees, bicycle paths and historical awnings.

But for Jackie Blackwell, parking in the downtown area is a serious concern. Blackwell, who owns the Blackwell Building said she has future plans for a restaurant on Main Street, but she is worried about parking for her customers.

"If you are an office, parking is not an issue," Blackwell said. "But if you are retail, parking is an issue."

Several Martinsville residents also attended the meeting to offer suggestions for the downtown area. Marie Dake, a lifelong Martinsville resident said the revitalization discussions are promising.

"I would just like to see downtown come to life again," Dake said.