



Ideas surface to enhance downtown

By Denise Richardson
Staff Writer

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ONEONTA _ Imagine shopping in downtown Oneonta on Thursday night.

In the days when Bresee's Oneonta Department Store was open, shopping that night was a local tradition. A downtown event tapping into that history was among ideas floated to promote Oneonta at a meeting Thursday morning.

About 20 downtown merchants, property owners, city officials and economic developers met at Stella Luna Ristorante on Market Street to talk about enhancing the city's business district.

Officials reviewed plans to renovate the former Bresee's building, promoting Oneonta as a tourist destination for day or overnight trips and developing housing for college students and senior citizens.

Mayor John Nader, Carolyn Lewis, Otsego economic developer, and Richard Miller, of 55 Maple Street LLC, led the review of plans to renovate the former Bresee's store and a general discussion about the economic viability of downtown Main Street.

In June, the city formed a public/private partnership to provide the downtown business district with a team of business and community development professionals.

Lewis said Thursday's meeting was an effort of the Downtown Development Team of the Otsego County Economic Development Office and 55 Maple Street. To establish an advisory board, a meeting was held last month by invitation. But discussion then was to expand representation and all property and business owners in the downtown area were invited to Thursday's meeting, which was the first of its kind, she said.

The broader format will be followed for future meetings, Lewis said, and economic incentives will be discussed at the next meeting, tentatively to be in September.

On Thursday, Lewis stressed the importance of developing niche businesses that already exist downtown. Vacancies in the local market wouldn't support a Gap clothing store but would be workable for a regional business that is expanding, she said.

Lewis said the target completion date for the project at the former Bresee's store is June 2011. The facade of the building will be stored for use in the building renovations, she said.

The facade removal may start this autumn, officials said Thursday.

The 75,000-square-foot complex at 155-161 Main St. has been largely vacant for more than 10 years, and it has significant roof damage and other structural problems. The city is leasing the complex from Otsego County Development Corp. for \$1 a year. Lewis is administrator of OCDC.

Redevelopment plans involve tearing down about one-third of the existing complex. Some of the space created would be used for parking. The project has an estimated cost of about \$7 million, officials said Thursday.

Miller, whose firm 55 Maple Street has a contract with the city for downtown development, told the group that retail and tourism are "the great hope for the future" of Oneonta, which could be a "small-scale" version of Saratoga.

Downtown has an intimate setting that is attractive to visitors, Miller said. But it needs some specific niche retailers, including at least one antiques shop and a private art gallery, and signs or other means that promote existing businesses that aren't very visible, he said. There also is an unmet demand for Oneonta T-shirts, sweatshirts and mugs, he said.

Miller, an independent candidate for mayor, said if he is elected, he would have to give up the 55 Maple Street contract with the city. His opponents are Republican Erik Miller, Third Ward alderman, and Democrat Jason Corrigan, a student at the State University College at Oneonta.

Deborah Blake, executive director of the Artisans Guild at 148 Main St. downtown, said the meeting Thursday was good because it generated some productive instead of "pie in the sky" ideas.

Blake shared that the guild, a cooperative of area artists, has been opening at 9 a.m. Saturdays, an hour earlier than usual, to accommodate tourist and farmers' market traffic. Between 10 and 20 people stop in the store, she said, and some while other retailers aren't open.

The downtown business district group is circulating a survey to identify operating hours, staffing issues, customer data, training needs and suggestions for types of businesses to attract to Main Street.

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Photos



Oneonta Mayor John Nader and Otsego County Economic Developer Carolyn Lewis review plans for renovating the former Bresee's building at a meeting in Stella Luna Ristorante in the city Thursday. (Star photo by Denise Richardson)