



New director of Main Street has high hopes for downtown

BY JOE GIESSLER • The Eagle-Gazette Staff • June 6, 2010

LANCASTER -- David Uhl wants to look out the window of his downtown office and see a bustling, thriving community with businesses from end to end.

The new director of Main Street Lancaster said such a vision is not a pipe dream; it is a goal well within reach -- but not without the community's help.

"We have a downtown that is alive and well. Alive and well and getting better," Uhl said. "We certainly have challenges ... but anyone who suggests downtown is dead (should realize) we have great restaurants and great businesses doing well."

Uhl, the former campus director for Daymar College, was selected the director of Main Street Lancaster and manager of the Special Improvement District. His first day on the job was May 24.

For the past year, Uhl has been the campus director at Daymar College. Prior to that, he spent 10 years in various jobs within higher education. Uhl replaces Karen Rotkis, who was called to active duty with the U.S. Army Reserves in April.

He said the two biggest challenges to the revitalization of downtown are the poor economy and creating a solid identity for the area to be built around.

"We want to be known for something, and we are trying to get a handle on what that is," Uhl said.

He said the focus groups, which are under way, will help develop a strategic plan to be given to potential downtown investors.

One of Uhl's goals is to fill the vacant storefronts and properties of downtown, including the former Mithoff building.

He said a key to achieving that goal will be selling businesses on locating downtown instead of following the current trend of setting up shop near River Valley Mall and Ety Road.

"We need to talk up the benefits of being downtown. There's tons of opportunity here. There is a ton of foot traffic. If you go out on Ety Road it's not alive and happening," he said. "There are significant possibilities for a customer base downtown."

Uhl said he plans to continue and hopefully add to the list of downtown events such as the Gus Macker basketball tournament, Chocolate Walk, Art Walk and Farmers Market.

"Businesses have to figure out how to best take advantage of people coming down here," he said. "Gus Macker is a sporting event, so burgers and dogs will be most popular. You need to cater to these mass

groups of people."

Uhl said community support will be needed to revitalize downtown, which may include choosing to shop at local stores instead of going outside the area.

"I think that is very important. You got to have buy-in from the community," he said. "We could have the best downtown, but if there is no support from residents, it will not work."

Terice Goeller of Lola Leigh Boutique, 105 N. Columbus St., said she hopes development is made on the Mithoff building. She said filling store fronts will benefit all businesses.

"That will draw more people downtown if those are filled," Goeller said.

Goeller said the downtown events are a benefit to their business and hope they continue.

"The Chocolate Walk was fantastic. We had so many people coming in," she said. "It's great advertisement."