

THE CALL

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BURRILLVILLE - Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation (RIEDC) Executive Director Keith Stokes visited with the Burrillville Town Council Tuesday to discuss local economic development initiatives.

Stokes recognized Burrillville as being ahead of the pack in providing areas for commercial development, such as Commerce Park, and said the EDC will work with the town to help actively market the sites. The meeting was arranged by state Sen. Paul W. Fogarty (D-Dist. 23, Burrillville, Glocester, North Smithfield and Rep. Cale Keable (D-Dist. 47, Burrillville, Glocester). A similar meeting was held with town officials in neighboring Glocester.

The purpose of Tuesday's meeting was to discuss the proposed Rhode Island Main Street Program, which the RIEDC is developing with the Rhode Island Heritage and Preservation Commission, the Pawtucket Foundation, Gov. Lincoln Chafee's community affairs staff, Preserve Rhode Island and Grow Smart Rhode Island. The program, which is now in the early planning stages, will provide assistance to communities that want to revitalize their downtowns, preserve their unique identities and further opportunities for small-business growth and economic development.

"Burrillville and Glocester need assistance in bringing vitality back to their village centers. We need to attract businesses that are good, clean neighbors and that make it possible for people in our rural communities to work and do business locally," said Fogarty who pointed out that Glocester's downtown area faces particular struggles attracting businesses because of a lack of public sewer and water and a bridge whose disrepair has led to parking and pedestrian restrictions for several years.

"In our area, most of our village centers grew around mills whose employees could walk to work, eat at the nearby restaurants and bakeries, shop at the corner stores, and visit the local barber shop," said Keable. "As the mills shut down and people went to work outside of town, the businesses in the downtowns disappeared too. But there's a growing awareness of the importance of supporting local businesses and shopping locally, and our residents want those businesses back. We just need to make it possible to attract and keep the appropriate businesses in those areas, and make our Main Streets places where residents want to spend their time, not just their money."

The RIEDC is the full service, official economic development organization for the state of Rhode Island. A quasi-public agency, the corporation serves as a government and community resource to help streamline the business expansion in, and relocation to,

Rhode Island. The agency assists companies with commercial real estate, business financing, workforce training and other relevant issues.

Stokes told the Burrillville Town Council that the RIEDC will provide augmentation and support for locally developed initiatives, and also recommended a "unified vision" for downtown Pascoag to enable consideration of RIEDC support through its Main Street Initiatives program.

Stokes said the Main Street Program is being established to engage small business and commercial property owners in urban communities to work together with local officials to develop a preservation-based strategy for rebuilding the places and enterprises that make sustainable, vibrant and unique commercial main streets. He noted that a model for this program is the national Main Street Program which is currently run by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. He reported that the initial urban core communities have been identified as Providence, Pawtucket, Woonsocket, Central Falls and West Warwick. Stokes went on to explain that "Main Street Growth Centers" must be designated as such by the local community and Town Council before the EDC becomes actively involved.

However, Stokes advocated for business forums to be held within the community to discuss possible areas and initiatives that have the potential for EDC involvement.

During the meeting, Keable introduced Dr. Kenneth Milligan, a Burrillville native, who along with his business partner, is interested in the possibility of establishing a Northern Rhode Island base for a segment of their company. Milligan spoke briefly about his product, Power Cap, and the type of jobs it could bring to the area.

In closing the session, Town Council President Nancy Binns thanked Stokes and his staff and asserted, on behalf of the council, that the town will arrange a forum between local business owners and EDC members to explore ways to identify means of credit expansion and other support for existing businesses.

In 2000, the Burrillville Redevelopment Agency was established to identify and improve those areas in town long considered blighted and substandard.

One of the very first things the fledgling agency did was to inventory those areas and prioritize them. Topping the list was the downtown business district in Pascoag and the former Stillwater Mill complex in Harrisville.

In the 10 years since the agency was formed, a lot has happened.

The last phase of the Stillwater Mill rehabilitation project - the conversion of the clock tower building into mixed-income and elderly housing units - is completed.

Neighborworks Blackstone River Valley Alliance, which is heading the overall rehabilitation of the mill site, had been working on the clock tower building since September of 2009. The town sold the building to Neighborworks Blackstone River Valley Alliance in July of 2008. As part of the project, the clock tower building - which has loomed over the sprawling 4.4-acre mill site for years - has been converted into 47 mixed-income and elderly housing units.

The project was completed two months ago.

Developers are now in the process of pre-leasing the units - called The Clocktower Apartments - for April.

This was the last phase of the mill rehabilitation project, which included the town's construction of the new Jesse M. Smith Memorial Library. The \$9 million library facility was constructed at the north end of the Stillwater Mill site and is the cornerstone of the town's efforts to revitalize the mill.

As for downtown Pascoag, the agency's goal to fill vacant storefronts and redevelop vacant lots is fast becoming realized.

The historic New York Department Store, once a cornerstone of Fountain Square, is an example of that success. The building on High Street was deemed unsuited for rehabilitation and a proposal to demolish the building and construct a new Dunkin' Donuts

and Baskin Robbins ice cream parlor was made, and nearly brought to fruition. But in 2004, the project was abandoned. Instead, the owner of the property on the opposite corner, Mark Murphy, acquired the property and constructed the building as proposed. The new tenants include NorthWest Health Center, Pascoag Chiropractic, Logee Insurance Co. and Hershey ice cream parlor. There are four apartments above, which were also part of the original plans.

In 2006, town officials officially opened the ½-mile riverwalk along the Clear River in downtown Pascoag. The riverwalk is one phase of a multi-phase pedestrian trail system that will improve active recreation opportunities within the town's village centers and ultimately link the villages together.

In 2001 the town acquired ownership of the historic laundromat building at 96 Main St. to save it from being demolished. At high flow, the Pascoag River came in the basement over the stone slab foundation and damaged the supports. Through the use of Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), a Neighborhood Opportunity Program grant from the RI Housing Resources Commission, and town funds, the building was stabilized by raising it up, and a new concrete foundation and first floor were built. A new roof and temporary first floor facade were put on and a new deck was added to the side to overlook the Pascoag Riverwhile while the building was prepared for resale.

The 2,284-square-foot building was sold last fall to Royal Laurent, a town resident since 1997 who has owned and operated Clear River Technical Services since 1993. Laurant took over the renovations, which are now complete. He runs his business on the upper floor and the first floor has two retail spaces currently available for rent.

A couple of years ago, the Redevelopment Agency partnered with Bryant University to examine marketing strategies to attract steady business investment to Pascoag's downtown business district and investigate ways the town can help set downtown Pascoag apart from other regionalized retail outlets.

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