

Summit explores solutions for downtown malaise

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By EMILY DUPUIS / Sun Staff Writer | 2 comments

WESTERLY - Retailers and landlords made a strong showing Thursday as the town kicked off discussions on revitalizing what one participant described as the cultural, civic and commercial center of town.

Billed as the "Downtown Summit," the two-hour discussion drew roughly 100 business and property owners, and town and state officials to the third-floor of the Westerly Public Library.

"It's important we show, just in our numbers, how committed we are to the future of the downtown," said Town Manager Steven Hartford, wrapping up the meeting he organized to address vacancies and economic struggles in the retail and residential area.

He and a six-member panel plan to release a report within 30 to 45 days "that might be a roadmap for building on what's been done in the downtown and what we want to see in the future."

Solutions suggested by attendees included working with landlords to make rent more affordable, extending the hours and days of business for patron convenience, adding signs to bolster downtown's profile and streamlining the licensing and permitting process.

While empty storefronts on High and Canal streets are visible, panelists and attendees also said not to forget the area's strengths: the river, Wilcox Park, library, Town Hall, train station, historic buildings, restaurants, low crime rate, seasonal events and new apartments being constructed.

Carrie Baird, a panelist, outgoing president of the Downtown Business Association (DBA) and owner of Carrie's Shoes on High Street, said of the vacancies, "I think it is as bad as it looks."

And customers are concerned, she said.

David Rathbun, longtime owner of the Starkweather & Shepley Insurance building at 16 Broad St., said "greedy" landlords present the biggest problem.

"There's greed up High Street, absentee landlords," he said. And problems will not be solved until "we can get rid of them, and get them to realize that a vacant store is not going to make any money."

"There's something ascrew up High Street," he said, drawing laughs from the crowd.

Rathbun also suggested businesses remain open in the evening when parents drop their children off at the Ocean Community YMCA or at the karate and dance studios.

"There's plenty of opportunity but we've got to modernize for the times," he said. Nancy Creaturo, a business and property owner, said putting a walkway along the river - a scaled-down, affordable version of the long envisioned riverwalk - would go a long way.

Bruce Prescott, owner of Zoe & Co. on High Street, suggested the town bury utilities underground on High and Canal streets and repair cracked sidewalks.

A tourist information booth or kiosk and enhanced police presence could give the downtown a boost, said Sheila Fravesi, of The Bean Counter on Broad Street.

And Stefanie Gabriele, owner of High Street specialty boutique Anya Blu, said the DBA should have a voice with the Licensing Board to protect against uncomplimentary businesses locating downtown.

Harvey Perry, president of the Westerly Land Trust, which operates out of the Industrial Trust building on High Street, called to promote "sustainable tourism" - the idea that an authentic and unique place desirable to residents will attract tourists - and to discourage chain stores from moving in.

Panelist Lisa Konicki, director of the Greater Westerly-Pawcatuck Area Chamber of Commerce, said they received fewer inquiries from entrepreneurs last year - 10 compared with 40 to 60 in past years.

But, she added, "Crisis creates opportunity."

Konicki called for the community to recruit the qualified unemployed to fill the vacancies.

"There are employees out there and there are leaders with real skills out there," she said.

Konicki also called for more downtown retailers and owners to step up to the table: "It's unfair to expect a handful of business owners to carry for all for the overall picture of downtown."

Panelist Michael Rauh, executive vice president at the Washington Trust Company, said businesses and property owners, and not government, need to take the lead to revitalize the area.

But both local and town officials did offer assistance.

Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation Director of Business Development Katharine Flynn said the quasi-public agency hosts workshops on topics ranging from social networking to writing a business plan, and assists companies with obtaining permits and financing. Rhode Island Housing Executive Director Richard Godfrey said their Keep-Space Project is investing in Westerly to promote residential and commercial development, "walkability" and public transportation downtown.

"I think that working together we can build a better Rhode Island and use our strengths and our advantages to create a vibrant place, and that's what Keepspace is about. It's about creating communities, working together," he said.

Rep. Donna Walsh, DCharlestown, serves on a House committee aimed at streamlining the licensing and permitting process at the state level.

She recommended looking to the National Trust for Historic Preservation for available funds, bringing the town's active historical society into the fold to

promote sustainable tourism and "pop up" stores, which give entrepreneurs short-term leases to get businesses off the ground.

Westerly Councilor Kenneth Parrilla called for the town to focus on retaining industry, while Councilor Dick Anthony said local retailers need to press state legislators to improve Rhode Island's business climate, currently among the worst in the country.

Rep. Samuel Azzinaro, D-Westerly, encouraged attendees to contact their legislators.

And Sen. Dennis Algieri, R-Westerly, said shareholders and stakeholders must work collaboratively: "We're going to come out of [the recession] shortly. We really are. But we need to work together and when we do come out of it, we're going to be out of the starting blocks ready to go."