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Thursday, April 27, 2006

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Thursday, April 27, 2006

Rochester shows enthusiasm as candidate for Main Street

By ADAM D. KRAUSS
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ROCHESTER — Wednesday's informational Main Street meeting was exactly what downtown business owner Kathy Sweeney needed.

She got to hear from people who said Rochester, expected to be the only community to apply for the program this year, is in solid position to be New Hampshire's next Main Street community.

Her sense in community, at times shaken by seeing the same people at the same meetings, was restored with the huge turnout of merchants, civic leaders and volunteers with Community Organization for Rochester Enhancement, the group spearheading the effort with the city.

And, maybe best of all, for an hour or so Sweeney was able to imagine North Main Street without the notoriously vacant Hoffman building, which sits across from her Busy Bean Cafe, as she listened to the presentation inside City Hall.

"I'm excited about it. I want to see downtown rebuilt. I want to see all the storefronts full. I just want to see it all fixed up," said Sweeney, a member of CORE's public relations committee. She said she was happy "to see there were so many people here that care, that really care about downtown."

Those in attendance heard from Economic Development Manager Karen Pollard, CORE President Gary Dworkin, the Dover and Somersworth Main Street directors — who each offered hope and perspective — and also New Hampshire Main Street Center Director Kathy La Plante.

La Plante's prepared remarks explained how the center provides professional and technical assistance to cities and towns selected for the program, which today totals more than 1,800 communities in 43 states, including 18 statewide.

She reviewed the program's guiding principles and successes, including the 828 new business that opened in the state since 1997, 2,548 jobs that were created and 197 new housing units made available. Between renovations, new construction and public improvements, more than \$274 million has been invested across 1,901 projects, she said.

It wasn't until after the meeting, when business owners began mingling, that La Plante let on to Rochester's positive prospects for joining the program. The city's application is due in mid-August, with an announcement expected during the downtown conference Oct. 24 and 25 in Portsmouth.

"Rochester is ahead of the game in that they've had an organizational (group) that has been dedicated to working on some projects," she said. "They've got a good board. They're really taking everything into consideration and haven't tried to rush it. ... They've really done thoughtful preparedness for this application, and you could tell this from tonight's presentation."

La Plante said it's critical CORE and the city show the center's review committee that the financial backing is in place, a key element not lost on those in the room. Dworkin, after making some remarks, asked people there and watching at home to consider pledging up to \$75 to help secure the \$100,000 needed for a local director and other things.

That likely won't be all of the necessary costs, but it covers the bulk of what's needed to get going. CORE has asked the City Council to appropriate \$35,000 and is gathering \$33,000 from corporate donors. The remaining funds need to come from businesses and interested residents. Pledges can be made by calling the CORE office at 330-3208 and information can be obtained at www.core-nh.org.

"We want it. We need it. We can benefit from it," Dworkin said, later adding it's critical people with questions contact him or others as soon as possible.

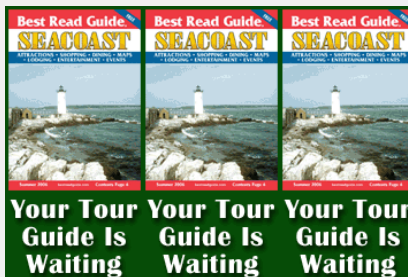
Pollard said the city is in great shape to be selected, evidenced by the words she used during her presentation. She repeatedly said things like, "When CORE is accepted as" the next Main Street Community, and "I anticipate this is going to be a successful effort."

Pollard said if the city can realize the \$12.5 million national average of downtown investment in Main Street communities it will increase the city's assessed value by 8.5 percent. She said the 360 downtown properties are valued today around \$145 million. More work is being done to



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catalog businesses, vacancies and other things, she said.

Mayor John Larochelle, joined by a handful of other councilors, said he liked what he heard. "I think things are coming together for Rochester," he said. "Change is going to happen. We want change to happen in the right way ... in a way that keeps people excited about our community."