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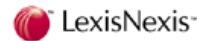
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CREATIVE COMMUNITIES SOUGHT IN CITY; MDA PROJECT SEEKS INITIAL PUBLIC INPUT ON FOUR TARGETED AREAS NEAR DOWNTOWN.

By Frederic Pierce Staff writer
The Post-Standard (Syracuse, New York)
February 4, 2007

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The Metropolitan Development Agency is working on a yearlong, \$350,000 study funded by the Ford Foundation aimed at developing "creative communities" in Syracuse.

As part of that plan, the agency is hosting a series of meetings this week to get creative ideas from the public about four specific areas of the city.

Ben Walsh, the MDA staffer heading up the effort, spoke about the project recently. Here's some of what he said:

Just what is a creative community?

We're really talking about a state of mind and a feeling you have when you're in a particular place. It's the idea that no matter what a person is doing there - whether it's working or relaxing or just living - a certain element of creativity can be applied.

Almost by definition, you can't replicate other creative communities. All areas have certain elements that make them authentic in and of themselves. The idea is we highlight these authentic elements in these communities - whether it be the people that live there or the actual building stock that's there - to make them attractive places for people to live.

What's the point of these meetings?

We want to find out what people who are living in these areas around the city think about their communities, their concerns, their hopes, and how that fits in with the whole creative community theme. We'd like to get everyone's thoughts on what they perceive a creative community looks like.

The first two phases of the project really dealt with mapping and cataloging the area we're looking at. This phase is really the first step in working with the community to define what a creative community actually looks like in different areas of the city.

Why were these areas selected?

This community has seen a renewed appreciation of our historic and industrial building stock, but the focus has primarily been downtown. We wanted to find what factors are not allowing the same type of investments to extend out beyond the traditional downtown into the inner-ring neighborhoods.

We started with a fairly arbitrary number of a mile and a half radius in and around downtown Syracuse. Based on some initial work by consultants and staff, we attempted to find out where the logical place is to initiate some tangible projects.

These are areas that, for one reason or another, seem to be good building blocks toward reaching that overarching vision of transforming our entire city into a creative community.

A lot of good planning has already been done in Syracuse. Rather than duplicate any efforts, we decided to see how we might use this project to fill in some of the gaps in the overall vision. We hope that with some strategic investments in particular areas of the city, we can begin to make some of those connections and work with the neighborhoods to make sure it is their visions that are being seen.

What if I have ideas about other places in the city?

Anyone who wants to think above and beyond these initial study areas are really encouraged to come to the first meeting, at the Oncenter. That's where we want to really kick off a communitywide discussion of the entire city of Syracuse and the entire Central New York Upstate region as a creative community.

Once you have a redevelopment plan, what happens then?

We're looking to submit a report that basically lays out a community vision. We then hope to continue to work with the Ford Foundation and other community and national resources to identify where we may have areas where we can work together and begin to see these visions actually unfold.

The endgame here is to begin to bring private investment into these neighborhoods.

What will happen to residents whose neighborhoods are redeveloped?

A lot of these neighborhoods have very different demographics than downtown. They have some of the poorest communities, not only in our region, but in the country. We really want to be creative in trying to find ways to move forward in a way that the folks who are living in these areas are a part of it, and have ownership over it.

What attracted the Ford Foundation to this project was the idea that we were trying to do something different. You can go to almost any major city in the country and find the Armory Squares of the world in the rejuvenated entertainment districts.

What is harder to find are communities that have seen rejuvenation and renewed energy and private

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investment being made in a way that is helping to simultaneously improve the existing neighborhoods.

Community discussions

The Metropolitan Development Foundation plans four community discussions in Syracuse this week. All are 7 to 9 p.m.

South Salina-Fayette: Monday at the convention center at Oncenter, 800 S. State St.

North Salina-Butternut: Tuesday at the Assisi Center, 800 N. Salina St.

South Salina-West Castle: Wednesday at the Dunbar Center, 1453 S. State St.

West Fayette corridor: Thursday at St. Lucy's Auditorium, 425 Gifford St.

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