

## 'Oil City will not be the same 10 years from now'

By MICHAEL MOLITORIS

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Experts discuss their revitalization plans for the city.

Experts publicly explored downtown revitalization steps Wednesday evening they think could spell a decade of change and growth for Oil City.

"Oil City will not be the same 10 years from now," said Peter Fairweather, one of two consultants who has been working with the city since late spring to draft a multi-year rebirth plan for the one-time oil town.

He and Thomas Shepstone discussed their plans before nearly 40 city residents, business owners and community leaders at Christ Episcopal Church's parish hall. The plans span business, housing and arts sectors.

Their goal is to incorporate Wednesday's public feedback into a final report and action plan that will be handed down within the next two months to city leaders.

"We had some good input and lots of insight," Fairweather said after the meeting.

The men first suggested selling the "Hub of Oildom" to the arts community and making the city a welcoming place that out-of-town artists will want to call home.

Fairweather said the arts idea should include establishing a criteria and inventory of "good art space," local artist-friendly economic incentive programs, and local events to sustain and promote artists and build on the arts-related successes of other communities.

Oil City Arts Council member Leslie Paul, who chaired the Oil Heritage Festival arts show in the National Transit Building, believes that plan has merit judging from the number of artists she met last weekend interested in local studio space.

"I don't think you'd have a problem finding local artists," she said.

"I'm not sure you'd want people saying 'Not another artist colony'," city resident Margo Mong added later. "Everybody's doing that. I think we need to build on our natural resources."

In another area, Shepstone introduced the idea of incentive packages and programs for new businesses that include revolving, low-interest loan funds, business planning and promotion assistance and incubator programs that integrate developers and building owners.

The men also detailed a previously mentioned business improvement district program that would essentially manage a prescribed chunk of the community like a resort or shopping mall. Property owners where businesses reside would be taxed a percentage of their assessed property value, and that money would be used for cultivation and special-attention-paying to properties and businesses in that district.

The fees would cover improvement district management, public relations, event coordination, beautification, cleanup, signage and real estate marketing.

"Many BIDs now market downtowns as if they were resort hotels, providing, in addition to the basics, such services as entertainment, event management, special promotions, housing development and tourism promotion," Shepstone said earlier this summer. A business improvement district would offer a destination experience, including clean streets and buildings with the "right mix" of services.

The city also could benefit from establishing developer partnerships that eye public and/or tax-sale parcels for redevelopment.

Lumping larger chunks of real estate for rehabilitation or housing developments likely would increase chances that developers would want to pursue some of those projects, Shepstone believes. He thinks one of the keys to rebuilding downtown retail is to "think residential."

"In order to sell things, you've got to have people to sell it to," he said. "Promote Oil City as a place to live and sell the story that you really can't afford not to live in Oil City."

In addition to tailoring downtown attractions for people who would live there, Shepstone said second homeowners should not be left out of the mix.

"Target events at second homeowners and solicit them as investors in Oil City projects," he said.

Second homeowners are those who own dwellings in the area that are not their primary residences. Combining Venango and surrounding counties, he said

several regional counties have nearly 20,000 such dwellings.

"That contributes a tremendous amount in spending," he said.

Oil City attractions also could reap rewards from being packaged regionally with other draws in surrounding counties, rather than focusing tourism efforts solely on the city. Shepstone suggested an example of selling a package trip that included a stop at the city's National Transit Building coupled with a golf outing in Tionesta.

"Both parties gain," he said. "You can get large numbers if you promote it as part of something else."

City zoning restrictions should be examined and made more user-friendly.

"I haven't seen many problems with your zoning, but there are some areas that may need to be looked at," Shepstone said.

Zoning rules have the power to emphasize uniform design and aesthetic standards for the business community or they could loosen the number of parking spaces allowed for each downtown residential dwelling.

And it couldn't hurt for Oil City always to have something to tell outsiders about - a "buzz" that could lure the curious and destination-hungry to the city's attractions.

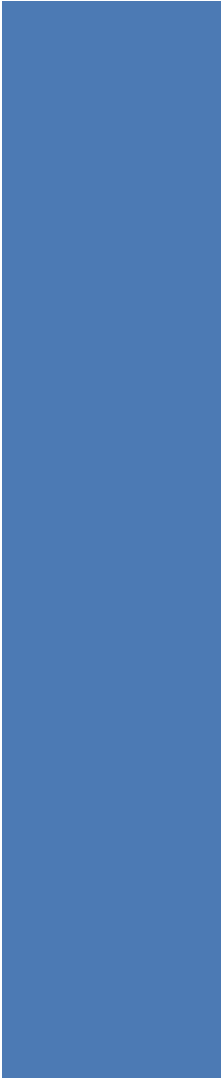
"If you get the word out, you need to make sure there's always something nice to talk about," Shepstone said.

Restaurants and attractions always should be touted, and news releases about Oil City happenings should be issued weekly to "target audiences."

Future success could rely on Oil City being thought of as a regional recreation service center that recruits recreation support businesses like bed and breakfasts or outfitters while soliciting complementary enterprises like antiques and crafts vendors.

Establishing a downtown square would further integrate entertainment and festivals into the community, and the men suggested holding monthly festivals or theme events in the vein of the Oil Heritage Festival.

"Successful downtowns have events every month," Shepstone said.



City resident Pauline Case suggested that already-established monthly concerts in the National Transit Building could serve as a springboard or anchoring event for such occasions, but Barb Crudo said other businesses would have to come on board and support late-evening events.

"The National Transit Building and art gallery are open, but nothing else is open. It's an isolated thing," Crudo said.

The consultants will return to Oil City in late August with a draft report. More information about their Oil City project is available on the Internet at [www.Shepstone.net/OilCity](http://www.Shepstone.net/OilCity).