

Main street emergence?

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—Cornelius Swart

Northeast, St. Johns and city ponder development programs

With city budget projections plunging and many neighborhood businesses struggling, February saw a flurry of meetings and discussions in Northeast Portland and St. Johns centered around neighborhood revitalization efforts, the Oregon Main Street Program and a new Portland Main Street Program.

The Oregon Main Street Program, modeled after the National Main Street Program administered by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, currently offers marketing, networking, and consulting services to mostly rural communities looking to revitalize their downtown commercial districts.

In September of 2008 the North/Northeast Business Association was awarded an Oregon Main Street Program partnership. N/NEBA had intended to use the program to help with the revitalization of Northeast Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and the area's neighborhood commercial streets like Northeast Killingsworth Street.

"We're glad we were selected and it's going to help us revitalize the area," said N/NEBA representative Gary Brown. However, N/NEBA was not awarded the top-tiered program that it had applied for. The Main Street model is not often used in inner-city neighborhoods. As The Sentinel went to press N/NEBA's plans on how to proceed were still under discussion. "We just started the process," said Brown.

In St. Johns, however, a coalition of civic and business groups has set their sights on the Main Street program as well. On Feb. 5, a new group called the St. Johns Main Street Coalition was formed. The group represents a fairly unique collaboration between the North Portland Business Association, St. Johns Boosters, St. Johns Neighborhood Association, and Friends of Cathedral Park Neighborhood Association.

The group sent a letter of intent to the state of Oregon that it would apply for the next round of awards this March.

"The real opportunity is to put a framework around the implementation of the St. Johns Lombard Plan," said Ryan Deibert of the St. Johns Neighborhood Association. Deibert sees an opportunity to promote the area's existing land-use plan known as the St. Johns/Lombard Main Street Plan. He also sees a chance to encourage more cooperation between the area's civic groups.

"It gives us an opportunity to capitalize on collaboration and collaborative momentum," Deibert said.

"I've heard quite a bit of enthusiasm at the board meetings," said Deibert of the Main Street program. He believes the program will help to address a common concern in the area. "One thing I've heard repeated throughout the years here is 'help us fill our empty storefronts.'"

Main street long haul, no money for businesses

The state program does not include things like direct loans to businesses or cash to fix up storefronts or improve sidewalks and street lighting. Those kinds of programs, which may be more urgently needed during a recession, are currently available through the Portland Development Commission. Separate discussions about including St. Johns in an Urban Renewal Area have been ongoing since December of last year (see Sentinel December 2008).

At the same time, the Portland Development Commission and the mayor's office have been making plans to launch a similar Main Street program specifically aimed at city neighborhoods. According to the PDC, the city Main Street program would be "modeled on other urban main street programs found in such cities as Boston, Baltimore, and Washington DC."

"We need to build the budget up," said PDC Senior Project Coordinator Randy Evans. "It's at a relatively early stage."

The city sees that St. Johns may also be a candidate for the city-focused program. "St. Johns, in my

personal experience, they'd be a great area to work with," continued Evans.

The PDC and the mayor's office are still drafting the program, but expect to have a project up and running by this July.

Evans also acknowledges that neither Main Street program will provide short-term fixes for the current recession.

"Main Street folks will say, 'It's really a long-term process. It's really not until year five that you see the benefits,'" says Evans. "It's not really a solution to what is currently out there happening economically. It's not going to be an immediate fix."

For more information or to register, contact Oregon Main Street Coordinator Gary Van Huffel at (503) 986-0134 or gary.vanhuffel@state.or.us.