

Westine Report

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Bustling downtown within reach for Union Grove

By Gautam Singh

Main Street reconstruction in the Village of Union Grove is completed and downtown businesses are spending money to improve their storefronts.

Now the fun begins, according to Kristin Niemiec, a community development manager for the Racine County Economic Development Corporation (RCEDC).

Niemiec stepped into her role a year and a half ago as Union Grove was gearing up for Main Street redevelopment.

Now, decorative street lamps and stamped, brick crosswalks enhance the downtown as businesses have followed suit with façade improvements.

The RCEDC has guided the development on Main Street by helping the village set clear goals. "It helps shape their vision and get it right," Niemiec said. She added, "They don't have to follow it to a tee, but it helps guide the process."

Niemiec, like village officials, would like to see the downtown bustling once again and become a preferred destination for area residents.

In October 2007, the Village of Union Grove Board adopted the Village of Union Grove Economic Development Plan (EDP). The Village Board created the EDP through a series of meetings that reviewed economic conditions within the village and clarified several challenges critical to the village's economic health. Strategies were developed to meet each challenge and each strategy has primary and support agencies.

Now, a year later the Village Board has reviewed the EDP and the successes realized thus far.

One challenge was to revitalize the downtown in order to enhance services and the retail environment for residents and those in surrounding communities. As part of this process, the Community Development Authority (CDA) implemented the Downtown Redevelopment Plan. The plan included reconstruction of Main Street that was completed this summer and the Streetscapes plan, which included new streetlights, brick cross walks, flower planters and street trees. The CDA plans to have benches and trashcans installed this spring.

Niemiec also helped secure \$60,000 through the state Department of Transportation's Community Sensitive Design program to use toward the \$2.5 Main Street reconstruction and Streetscape plans.

In addition, the CDA began acquiring property for the first redevelopment project being undertaken by Pete and Cheryl Abbott. These properties are awaiting demolition and ultimately the construction of a mixed used commercial building as well as a four-unit apartment complex.

Across from this development, the former Swantz Hardware building is undergoing a total transformation into the Union Grove Downtown Depot. The property, purchased by Vioski Properties, LLC, will be divided into six smaller commercial units. The design for this property is to create the look of a historic train depot.

The redevelopment continues with the property at 1033 Main Street being purchased by Nancy Washburn. Washburn is in the process of renovating the building. She plans to open a business in the commercial space.

Karl Kuntsman of Milwaukee Notions, 1006 Vine Street, Peter Katres of 1036 Main Street, Charlotte Bruinsma of Mulberry's Pancakes Café, 1027 Main Street and McMahon-Veltus accounting firm, 901 Main Street, also have received façade grants.

The CDA recently approved a façade grant for the State Farm Insurance building, 1125 Main Street, where John Kurhajec works. Renovation is scheduled to begin in spring of 2009.

Callan's Restaurant, 1027 Main Street, will do their part by adding awnings.

"Every little bit helps," Niemiec said.