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Ashland hopes to restore look

Lynne Austin Staff

Project to revive
riverfront, attract

tourism, families

has wide support

By LYNNE AUSTIN

The Herald-Dispatch

laustin@hdonline.com

ASHLAND - New development on the city's riverfront soon may join a growing list of attractions bringing travelers and families to the downtown area.

The effort to revitalize one of the city's key locations comes as developers continue to renovate many of the downtown's historical landmarks. The riverfront project, expected to include an amphitheater and floating stage similar to Huntington's, also includes the possibility of reopening the marina.

With more than \$10.3 million invested in new business construction and another \$1.17 million in building rehabilitation, business and property owners hope the restored buildings and attractions will entice more people to visit the downtown area.

"Your downtown is the core of your community - it's your heart and soul," said Megan Buell, director of Ashland Main Street.

If the improvements are approved by the Ashland Board of City Commissioners, the riverfront project will highlight other downtown rehabilitation projects, including the **Henry Clay** House, which is currently undergoing an extensive facelift the Kitchen Building, now home to Lovemore Jewelers the Crump and Field Building, which houses a law firm, an eye care center and a community ballroom, and the McCleary building, now C.J. Maggie's, a popular eatery.

The city has until Dec. 8 to apply for the money needed to begin the work, said Amanda Sinnette, the city's director of community development.

Once the project and funding application are approved by city commissioners, the riverfront improvements will be funded primarily through state Renaissance money, along with a 20 percent local match, Sinnette said. Ashland qualified as a silver-level Renaissance city two years ago making it eligible for the funding.

"We didn't apply last year because we didn't have the 20 percent match," she said. "But this year, the city has the revenue and we've had discussions with foundations about pitching in."

Ashland was one of 15 cities originally designated a silver-level city under the statewide Renaissance program. Five across the state were honored as gold level.

Sinnette said the gold-level cities have a historical preservation ordinance in force, which protects the decades-old landmarks from destruction and encourages historically-accurate renovations. She and other community

leaders are studying a similar ordinance for Ashland, although it hasn't yet been approved.

In the meantime, Buell said developers' efforts haven't gone unnoticed.

"You can look at these buildings and see Ashland has done a good job," Buell said.

A local family has undertaken a massive effort to restore a former **hotel**, the **Henry Clay** House, located on the corner of Winchester Avenue and 18th Street. Built during a five year span in the late 1920s, the **hotel** opened in 1928 offering travelers stately rooms, a restaurant, a coffee house, a barber shop and a grand ballroom. Small shops also were housed around the perimeter of the building.

"You could have lived here. Everything you could have needed was right here," said co-owner Susan Madden.

Around 1980, the **hotel** was converted into apartments, meshing together two or three **hotel** rooms to make each apartment. The original 166 **hotel** rooms soon became homes for 52 apartment dwellers. While there are similarities among the one- and two-bedroom apartments, Madden said no two homes are identical.

But the building soon fell into disrepair as tenants moved on and a former owner neglected its upkeep, according to Madden. Problems were so severe, the landmark, listed on the National Historic Registry, was scheduled to be condemned just two months after Perry and Susan Madden bought it at auction.

"It was sad - it really was a dump," she said. "I just couldn't believe someone didn't step in and save it."

So the Maddens decided to take on the project.

"It's part of me," she said. "It's close to my heart and soul."

Now, with more than one year of restoration time already devoted and about 300 gallons of paint on the walls, Susan Madden said the work on the apartments is nearly finished. Forty-six of the units are now rented with work under way in the other four.

She said she hopes to soon use that revenue and future rent from office space around the building to begin restoring the old ballroom complete with a new ceiling - a project she expects to cost between \$50,000 and \$100,000.

"You feel the history there. When you close your eyes you can see the people dancing," she said. "That's what keeps me going."

Frances Morris remembers when her father worked at the old C & O depot as a railroader. Like many other downtown landmarks, it also fell into disrepair. About 15 years ago, however, National City Bank restored the building.

"It's beautiful now," said Morris adding she believes the push to restore downtown will breathe new life in the area.

"At one time people from Huntington came here to shop at Parsons (and other stores)," she said. " But anytime you let your town get dilapidated and rundown it gives the town a bad image ... when it's quaint it gives people a reason to come (and shop)."

The Maddens are struggling to raise funds to restore their landmark and other developers are hard-pressed to finance the expensive projects as well. But some resources are available to help with the projects.

Ashland Main Street offers low-interest loans of up to \$50,000 for renovations, as long as developers follow historical guidelines.

Also, a facade grant program will supply up to \$1,000 to business owners who want to spruce up their building's exterior, including uncovering facades. Since Main Street's inception in 1989, \$1.28 million has been invested in facade renovations for downtown buildings.

The city also encourages renovations by offering a significant tax break, Sinnette said. For example, a property owner who buys a building for \$80,000 and spends \$100,000 in improvements will only be charged the full property taxes on the original \$80,000 for five years, she said.

"On the other \$100,000 they're only taxed .001 percent, or virtually nothing," Sinnette said.

And property falling within the city's enterprise zone qualifies its owners for state help as well by waiving sales taxes on building materials for renovations.

In other downtown projects, many developers now are focusing on the upper floors of some of the old buildings, creating office space and apartments in once unused areas, Buell said.

In fact, one downtown business is considering remodeling its upper floors into a private party or banquet facility.

Jim Hatch, office manager for C.J. Maggie's, said something will eventually be done with the upper floors, but for now, the restaurant is top priority.

"We don't want to be in the landlord business," he said. "It's all pretty speculative right now."

C.J. Maggie's in Ashland is the third in a chain of the popular restaurants. The Ashland location, on the corner of Winchester Avenue and 14th Street, opened in September 1998 making use of an old building that had been vacant since its previous tenant, Excalibur's restaurant, went out of business.

The building required extensive cleanup and renovation and new windows were installed throughout, Hatch said.

"Excalibur's had just closed up and left food and everything in the refrigerators," he said. "The stench was terrible. We opened the doors and quickly closed them and got a Dumpster."

Now, rustic hardwood floors and checkered cafe curtains greet customers while old fashioned toys and other items are arranged throughout the eatery as unique decorations.

Ashland resident John C. King hopes the restoration of downtown will bring back some of the city's grandeur in reality - not just in the memories of some.

"If restoring some of the historic buildings would help return downtown to the way it used to be, I'm all for it," he said. A resident since 1934 King said he remembers a time when Ashland was aglow with activity well after dark.

"Just fixing up the buildings isn't enough," he said. "There needs to be something to do downtown." He added that shops closing early and a lack of movie theaters and other points of late evening interest helped turn Ashland into what it is today.

Melissa Moore/The Herald-Dispatch

Painter Michael Adkins has used about 300 gallons of white paint in the renovations of the apartments in the **Henry Clay House**.

Melissa Moore/The Herald-Dispatch

A newly remodeled and fully furnished 1,400-square-foot apartment in the **Henry Clay House** in downtown Ashland.

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