

Accentuating positives

Region benefits as communities embrace unique charms

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Visitors to Selinsgrove's downtown have probably noticed improvements at the vacant lot where a drug store once stood at Pine and Market streets.

The lot is no longer vacant. It is home to benches and landscaping. More work is planned.

The move is the most visible but not the only sign of progress in efforts to revitalize the borough's downtown shopping district. Selinsgrove officials are also in the process of hiring a Main Street manager.

Both initiatives come after several unique eateries and stores opened their doors. Selinsgrove officials must sense a chance to foster a coming Renaissance for their downtown.

The Snyder County borough is not the only local community that is enjoying a revitalized downtown. Earlier this month, Danville officials rejoiced at the news that Geisinger Medical Center plans to build an office building that will house 100 workers on Mill Street. It too will replace a vacant lot. And officials estimate the development will have a \$5 million annual impact on Danville's shopping district.

And if Selinsgrove officials want to model their Main Street program after successful versions, they need look no farther than neighboring Union County. Both Lewisburg and Mifflinburg have established successful Main Street initiatives. Just up the road, Milton's The Improved Milton Experience is participating in the Main Street program as well.

Lewisburg's downtown enjoys the benefit of its proximity to Bucknell University. But local officials have not rested on their laurels. Lewisburg business leaders have been very active and innovative in trying to find new ways to lure shoppers. Lewisburg is home to the Woolly Bear as well as the Bucknell Bison.

Mifflinburg has been monetizing its buggy-making history for years.

Milton too has been trying to coax more people into the borough's shopping district by highlighting the borough's history. Why not a giant ravioli in honor of the borough's most famous resident, Chef Boyardee? We might chuckle at the thought, but it would attract visitors from near and far.

At the confluence of the North Branch and West Branch of the Susquehanna, Sunbury officials have realized the value in turning toward the river long-hidden behind a miles-long floodwall.

Every downtown is unique. Local downtowns are thriving because they are embracing and marketing the things that make them special.

Vibrant downtowns are something local residents enjoy. But it is also something that visitors will appreciate as well. Competition for tourist spending is fierce. As more Valley communities find their calling cards, the entire region becomes more marketable. The success of this effort will become more important as the Valley's economy transforms. As economist Stephen Herzenberg told the Greater Susquehanna Valley Chamber of Commerce, "Rural Pennsylvania is at a crossroads."

The rural portions of the Commonwealth have been more reliant on manufacturing than the rest of the state.

And central Pennsylvania is more manufacturing-heavy than rural Pennsylvania as a whole. Twenty-one percent of the jobs in the Valley are in the manufacturing sector.

In a global economy, it may be dangerous to be too dependent on factory jobs. Efforts to reinvent the region's economy will benefit because the revitalized downtowns help make the region a place people want to call home.

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