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Matawan gets advice for downtown area Meeting is the start of new process to step up revitalization efforts

By Paul Dowd
Staff Writer

MATAWAN —When borough residents and business owners are asked what the primary concern for downtown is, invariably, the No. 1 answer will be parking.

The parking problems of the downtown area were just one of several topics discussed at a meeting between members of the Downtown Business Assistance Team (DBAT) and local merchants and residents at Jerry Beyer's Restaurant Thursday afternoon.

DBAT, comprised of leading strategic planners from around the state, is a service provided by Downtown New Jersey to towns around the state who are looking to enhance the business climate and competitive position of downtown retailers, according to Ralph Treadway, Matawan downtown redevelopment coordinator.

The borough's DBAT program is being provided as part of the NJ Transit Friendly Communities grant program. Matawan was one of 11 municipalities statewide to be selected for the program.

"This meeting is the beginning of the process of discovering and outlining the tasks needed to bring about an improved business climate in downtown Matawan," said Treadway.

DBAT is headed by Marvin Reed, who is president of Downtown New Jersey and mayor of Princeton; Beth Peterson, executive director of Downtown New Jersey; and Donald Smartt, strategic planner for commercial districts.

The parking concerns were voiced by the dozen retailers in attendance, as they wondered how to get people to stop and spend money in the downtown, especially the commuters heading to and from the train station.

According to Smartt, who has planned downtown revitalization projects in Freehold, Keyport, and Hightstown, the downtowns that work are ones with a partnership of local government, businesses and residents. Smartt added that it starts with the residents first.

"It is the community's residents who lead businesses in solving problems, not businessmen and politicians," said Smartt. "Every problem has a solution, but there has to be a partnership in place before anything can happen."

Smartt asked those assembled where the partnership for the borough was, to which Virginia Lamb-Falconer, president of the Downtown Matawan Alliance, said there is already a form of partnership between the borough, the business community and the alliance.

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Members of the DBAT suggested that residents look at stakeholders in the community to see who has the most to gain and most to lose, and determine who the players are. They defined the stakeholders as the leading politicians, residents and business owners.

"Get the best 10 percent of stakeholders. Don't wait for 50 percent to move on things," suggested Smartt. "You have to look at who comes first in the community; set the table for vital constituents."

Smartt said the next step for the borough is to solidify a public/private partnership (similar to RiverCenter in Red Bank), find money for funding projects, make a list of priorities, and identify problems and solutions for downtown. Smartt estimated it would cost between \$10,000-\$15,000 to start any plan implemented by the borough.

The DBAT panel asked borough retailers to list the town's greatest strengths and weaknesses. Strengths were listed as the people in town, the commitment of the alliance, the train station, and the safety of the streets. Weaknesses included parking, lack of pedestrian traffic, too much vehicular traffic (which was also acknowledged as a potential plus), empty storefronts, and an overall image problem for the town.

The meeting is the first of several between DBAT and the borough, although no date has been set for the next meeting, according to Joseph Leo, borough business administrator.

"This was a very positive meeting. The purpose is to give business owners input, a fact-finding mission," said Leo. "They'll bring back a laundry list for the next meeting, and we'll go from there."