

Beverly Main Streets embarks on second half of plan for 2020

By Dustin Luca Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, January 4, 2015 10:15 pm

BEVERLY — It isn't the year 2020 yet, but Beverly Main Streets is well on its way to realizing its Downtown 2020 vision.

Five years ago, the non-profit organization committed to improving downtown life put together an 84-page, 10-year plan for the city's commercial core.

Heading into 2010, "I started getting frustrated because we kept talking about the same things over and over," said Gin Wallace, Beverly Main Streets director. "The biggest thing we kept talking about was working with the city to upgrade parking lots."

As 2015 begins, the organization is five years into the 2020 plan, and they have five more to go. The next 12 months will be pivotal to the 48 months that follow it, according to Wallace.

Some of the work Beverly Main Streets has done since 2010 is easy to recognize, according to Wallace.

The parking lots finally got taken care of. And, whether it's a painting on a wall or a piano on a sidewalk, art is popping up all around downtown.

Other changes are less obvious. Three residential developments on Rantoul Street have brought 100 new residences to the downtown community, and the process to open a business has become more streamlined, according to Wallace.

"We kept seeing small businesses opening in Gloucester or Salem, and they were the exact businesses we wanted," Wallace said. "So we said, 'what can we do to incentivize them?'"

Enter the retail incentives grant, which businesses can apply for to pay for start-up or construction costs.

The grant recently helped Atomic Cafe more than double its size and buddy up with a new Hugo Books store. The combined business is expected to open across the street from Atomic Cafe's current



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DUSTIN LUCA/Staff photoGin Wallace of Beverly Main Streets is gearing up for the second half of the Downtown 2020 vision, first dreamed up in 2010 to create a new atmosphere downtown five years from now. Red signs throughout downtown are a recent addition brought by that vision.

location later this year.

“Now we’ve got people calling, saying, ‘tell me about those grants,’” Wallace said. “We’ve actually got a couple businesses in Salem and Gloucester saying, ‘My lease is up. Downtown Beverly is looking good. Tell me what you’ve got.’”

Looking ahead, Wallace said the organization’s agenda is loaded for this year.

Cultural district decision lands soon

The organization is pushing for the downtown community to be designated a cultural district by the Massachusetts Cultural Council. That news should come in the next couple of months.

Whatever the cultural council’s decision, Wallace plans to use their report to help guide her energies, she said.

Also among the organization’s goals for 2015 is the dream of a walking path to Beverly Common.

That proposal, targeting Winter Street, was envisioned early on and is reflected in drawings from 2012. But parking for Beverly Public Library takes up space for the path, according to Wallace.

“The Common is such a hidden treasure. When you’re standing on Cabot Street, you can’t see it,” Wallace said. “On Sunday afternoons when the library is closed, we’re working with the city to make this pedestrian-only and have an artist’s market there.”

Ellis Square to see plans in 2015

The organization also has long-running plans for Ellis Square to turn the one-time traffic island into an entertainment venue, Wallace said.

The organization ran events there last summer to get a feel for what kind of amenities they’d need to turn Ellis Square into a permanent entertainment space, according to Wallace.

To help with their plans, the organization recently picked up \$177,663 in Community Preservation Act money to redesign the square.

They’re coupling it with about \$100,000 of their own cash to bring a total overhaul to the site, according to Wallace.

About \$50,000 of that money has been raised so far, and Wallace said a campaign to get the remaining funding will be announced soon.

“The ball is in our court now,” Wallace said. “We’re trying to figure out what we can do to engage the public — something other than bricks.”

Therein lies one of their biggest challenges, according to Wallace — financial stability.

Fundraising strategy to shift

In 2011, the organization brought a team of donors together to promise three years of commitments to Beverly Main Streets, Wallace said. The group included Endicott College, Montserrat College of Art, several area banks and a number of small businesses.

Many of them returned and were joined by new donors for a two-year program beginning last year, according to Wallace.

“What this allowed us to do was to go to people who aren’t currently donors and say, ‘look, we have a plan,’” Wallace said. “Right now, we’re working on a fundraising strategy.”

That includes going to the public for donations directly, Wallace said.

“We still barely cover our expenses for events, but we feel like that’s one of our jobs,” Wallace said. “Now we have to look to the community to pay a little bit more for a button, to give us a donation for a block party.”

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