

Village looks for economic upswing

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Officials brainstorm ways to reinvigorate community's dormant development scene

The Village of Fredonia's Economic Development Committee hadn't met for more than a year, but that hiatus didn't dampen the enthusiasm displayed during a meeting last week.

"Basically, we are starting from scratch," said Trustee Lisa Dohrwardt, chairman of the committee.

The committee was unable to approve minutes of the last meeting, held in September of 2011, because none of the members was on the panel when it last met.

Village President Chuck Lapicola triggered the discussion last month when he asked the Village Board for authorization to pursue a bakery that was looking to relocate from Waukesha.

Lapicola, who sat in on the committee meeting, said he dropped that plan when he realized the company was interested in moving closer to its customer base.

However, committee members discussed a broad range of tactics intended to generate a surge in economic development. Suggestions included forming a business organization, asking businesses to consider moving to Fredonia and identifying sites for redevelopment.

Many of the topics, however, were brought up during a community meeting last fall that failed to spur a grassroots movement in the business sector.

Trustee Fritz Buchholtz, a downtown tavern owner, said the best way to promote the community as a welcoming place to conduct business is through a Chamber of Commerce. Fredonia is the only municipality in Ozaukee County that doesn't have a Chamber organization.

"A lot of what we are talking about, a Chamber of Commerce or merchants association should be doing. A Chamber could do things like develop a Facebook page and website that promote business in the village," Buchholtz said.

Although he insisted village government should not lead the push to form a Chamber, Buchholtz said it could host a brainstorming session with local business leaders.

"We could help get it rolling. Someone has to lead or it will never get done," he said.

Dohrwardt said the community might benefit from redefining itself, capturing the interest of business owners who might never have considered locating in Fredonia.

"A lot of artists like to live and work in small communities, so maybe we should look into ways to promote ourselves with artist groups," she said, suggesting the quaint setting could be ideal for studios, resale shops and bed-and-breakfast inns.

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Dohrwardt said she could see a host of artisans moving into vacant storefronts in the community, saying the committee should create an inventory of available business properties.

Trustees said redevelopment could be spurred if the village takes a more aggressive approach to building inspections, forcing landlords to reconsider the profitability of allowing their properties to fall into disrepair.

Officials said that approach might make property owners more interested in finding tenants for their buildings.

“We have so many properties in the village that people just let sit. That is one of our biggest problems,” Buchholtz said.

Lapicola said the village may need to take another look at easing restrictions against home businesses in residential areas.

Committee members admitted it is difficult to invite businesses to move into the industrial park when officials are uncertain what sites are available.

Lapicola urged a more dynamic approach, saying the community would benefit greatly if a strip mall could be developed on the property along the east side of Highway 57 owned by JBJ Development.

“People say Fredonia is the next community that can expect to see a development boom in Ozaukee County, but I think we are the next community to get jumped over unless we can get some people here,” he said.

“I am really worried that if we don’t succeed in getting something in here, we will be seen as nothing more than a bedroom community.”