

Elm Street District finding its voice

Blight, parking problems make top 10 hit list

By WENDY STIVER

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LOCK HAVEN — "The pressure of the neighborhood is going to speak louder than one individual," Elm Street planner Rick Riccardo said.

He and other volunteer members of the city's Elm Street Project Steering Committee met with neighborhood residents Thursday evening to look at the plan for improving the district.

The city wants a piece of the state's Elm Street Program pie and intends to use it to tackle one of its neighborhoods afflicted by "blight," the swath of 60 blocks that lies roughly between Lock Haven University and the downtown.

The neighborhood also includes a section of the city's Water Street Historic District, with homes that are the exact opposite of anything that could ever be called "blighted." It is a gateway to the university and shopping and contains 20 percent of the city's population.

Urban Research and Development Corp. has created a plan for the neighborhood, a document that will be part of the city's application to the state for official Elm Street designation and funding.

The professional planners reviewed what they've put together at the meeting in Ross Library.

Bryan Cope, community planner with URDC, said most of the properties in the neighborhood that are

"blighted" are student rentals.

The plan does not bash Lock Haven University students but rather embraces them and encourages them to be involved in their neighborhood. It also encourages willing landlords to improve or maintain their properties while calling for stronger code enforcement to force the unwilling ones to clean up and fix up as required.

North Fairview Street home owner Barry Overton, who lives next to student rental units, said the young people can be reasonable neighbors and should not be blamed for problems caused by landlords who don't take responsibility for their real estate.

He spoke of unsafe porches, a fire that apparently resulted from bad wiring and trash receptacles that regularly line the street and could roll into the roadway, get struck by a car and fly into a pedestrian.

"In the not-too-distant future, a student is going to be killed because of the crappy conditions," he said.

The proposed Elm Street Program would have volunteer committees to address these and other problems, Riccardo told Overton. It also would unite those who have a stake in the neighborhood so they can speak with one voice.

One or more committees could take a strong stance with certain property owners and tell them, "Hey, you're being disrespectful to the

neighborhood," Riccardo said.

The top 10 recommendations from students, home owners and business owners in the neighborhood included cleanup of blighted properties and strict code enforcement for properties in the worst conditions, according to Tom Palmer, executive vice president of URDC.

Other recommendations were:

- Repair sidewalks and curbs
- Add street lights
- Encourage local shopping
- Establish relations between students and residents
- Set up joint efforts and partnerships
- Build on the friendliness of the people
- Maintain and build up the quality education offered on all levels.

■ Improve parking and parking management, two things identified as priorities by both students and permanent residents, Palmer said.

"We're hoping some of you will become involved as volunteers," he said to the students.

The planners also reviewed potential action steps in each of the Elm Street Program's five focus areas: Organization, Design, Neighbors and Economy, Image and Identity, and Clean, Safe and Green.

Drew Sonntag, landscape architect with URDC, also presented drawings of projects, including improvements at the green area where

Fourth Street meets the levee and a spot for outdoor movies at the city's levee parking lot near campus.

He also talked about the proposed pedestrian mall from campus to the downtown, signs to identify the historic district and ways to improve North Fairview Street.

The Elm Street Program is designed to work with the Main Street Program, something the city already has up and running successfully. It has the potential of a \$50,000 operational grant for each of up to five years, plus a \$250,000 "residential re-investment" grant that can be used to help landlords and residents improve their properties.

There are only 38 Elm Street districts in Pennsylvania, Palmer reported. They include the program at Newberry in Williamsport, the Bull Run neighborhood of Lewisburg and Five Points/East End in Lewistown.

The next steps are for URDC to finalize the plan and include cost estimates for some of the suggested projects.

City Council will have to approve the plan and submit it to the state Department of Community and Economic Development, Palmer said.

"It's a plan," he said, and a plan is "a dynamic tool" that can change if the neighborhood wishes.

After the meeting, residents were encouraged to sign up as volunteers for a focus area that interests them.