

Kent County News

Architect proposes Park Row Revamp Grants eyed as funding source

15 October 2009 By Peter Heck

CHESTERTOWN - Architect Peter Newlin has a vision. That shouldn't surprise anyone. Visions of how something might look are an architect's stock in trade. Newlin and his colleagues spend a lot of time and study working up images of buildings that fulfill someone else's needs and dreams.

In this case, though, Newlin proposes redesigning a central part of Chestertown: Park Row. And his design is not for a single building, but for the entire street that borders Fountain Park on its east side, connecting the courthouse and the post office.

On Oct. 8, Newlin took his designs to the Kent County Public Library on High Street to solicit the opinions of members of the Chestertown Garden Club, which voluntarily does a significant portion of the upkeep and landscaping in the park. He came armed with drawings and description, and a healthy dose of enthusiasm for the project.

His proposals include several zoning adjustments,

allowing residential occupancy of the ground floors of Park Row buildings and arguing against off-street parking in a "pedestrian district." But they would also require several physical improvements such as brick sidewalks and tree wells along the street, and a major change in traffic patterns.

Newlin's key idea is to make Park Row a one-way street, with traffic flowing from Cross Street to Spring Avenue. There would be diagonal parking on both sides of the street, and a single lane of traffic down the middle. Both ends of the street would be narrowed to shorten crosswalks and to slow traffic. And the battered concrete sidewalk on the east side of the street - away from the park - would be replaced with brick.

The change would supplement zoning modifications needed in the Park Row area, Newlin said. In the document describing his project, he proposes "a new zoning class, HD-MU, Historic District Mixed Use to nurture the preservation and economic revival of

neighborhoods such as Park Row."

The current zoning of the street is C2, which prohibits residential use of the ground floor of any of the buildings. That prevents their use as B & Bs or apartments, which might make sense given their central location. Newlin notes that "all of the historic structures of Park Row are fundamentally residential." The exception, he says, is the building he now owns: the stucco building at 302/304 Park Row. It was built as a home office some time in the 20th century. He describes it as "structurally failing", and as "out of scale" with the rest of the neighborhood.

Newlin also argues that "Park Row is in deep trouble as a business district" His handout indicates that the offices and retail establishments are open less than one-third of the time. Part of the reason, he says, is that the structures aren't designed for retail occupancy, and have been allowed to deteriorate by absentee owners.

He cited the concrete sidewalks as "an environmental cue- you won't find much of value in this direction."



The architect ponders the collapsing building he and his wife bought on Park Row last June.



The brick sidewalks stop at Park Row, a signal to visitors there's not much of value going on here.

Newlin noted that the street is commonly used as a shortcut to avoid the traffic lights on High Street, resulting in high volume of traffic at speeds that reduce the safety of pedestrians. The absence of any crosswalk at the Spring Avenue end of the street is also a safety issue, he said.

Newlin suggested replacing the asphalt pavement of Park Row with permeable paving blocks, similar to those in the courthouse parking lot, to enhance stormwater management. Under his plan, the street would be closed during public events in the park. Instead of farmers market or music in the park setting up on the grass, they would use the street, reducing wear and tear on the grass.



THE PAVER PLAZA VIEWED FROM CROSS ST

Newlin's 3D computer model shows how Park Row can be recreated as a one way street with projecting peninsulas to slow traffic and new brick sidewalks along the building side to match those of the park. "Our plan allows the Farmers Market, for example, to serve customers on both sides," Newlin says, adding: "It will more than double Park Row's capacity to host special events like 'Art in the Park' and Craft Fairs, which attract wallets and purses downtown to feed our Art Galleries, Merchants and Restaurants. We need our leaders to invest in the pedestrian infrastructure and landscape like this, if Chestertown is to ever have a thriving downtown marketplace. Our pedestrian environment is our primary competitive advantage."

The garden club members had mixed reactions. Several said the plan "doesn't look like Chestertown," comparing it to an urban mall. Newlin suggested that anyone whose first reaction was negative take time to let the idea take shape in their minds. He said that his own first reaction to most of his ideas was "no," but that after a couple of days he was often able to see their benefits more clearly.

The garden club members also had questions. How much would the project cost and how much would it be financed? Newlin said his engineer has estimated the street work at \$200,000 if done without the permeable pavers, \$250,000 with the pavers and stormwater capture. The total doesn't include design or installation of landscaping, or street lights, he said.

Newlin said that this sort of downtown improvement project might be the kind of project Main Street Historic Chestertown would support, and said the organization might have access to grants for such a project. However, Main Street officers declined to comment on the project at this stage. Holly Geddes, president of the organization, did not attend the Oct. 8 meeting.

Newlin's ideas for Park Row remain in the formative stage, but he sees them as raising larger issues on the town's future both in terms of historic preservation and of economic vitality. "We now suspect Park Row is a microcosm of downtown, in the sense that the troubles we are discovering here, to varying degrees, may be dragging other neighborhood[s] down, too," his brochure says.

Newlin's handout concludes by asking how the community can organize to accomplish this agenda. A lot of that depends on whether he can enlist key decision makers in the project. And while he says that he has begun those conversations, they are still in the initial stages.

Mayor Margo Bailey was "noncommittal," he said. He has also had individual conversations with members of the planning commission. And while some were enthusiastic, others were unconvinced, he said. He said he had not spoken to town manager Bill Ingersoll, or to anyone from the post office, which would have to approve moving and rearranging the mailbox island at the Spring Avenue end of the street, as Newlin proposes.