

DOWNTOWN DREAMS

Twenty years ago a group of Tryon merchants went to the Tryon Chamber of Commerce (since transformed into the Foothills Chamber of Commerce) expressing their frustration about what could be done to fill empty retail spaces with quality, viable retail businesses.

The Tryon Business & Beautification Committee, self-appointed to address downtown concerns, was reviving the Christmas Stroll, the Halloween Stroll and a May Fair celebration to generate pedestrian traffic downtown. They were encouraging downtown businesses to spruce up their appearance and appeal.

The 12 merchants had to pass the hat to pay off the advertising debt from the previous Christmas Stroll. There was no money and no support from the Town of Tryon. It became apparent that benches and flowerpots and sidewalk sales were not going to solve the challenges. A committee from the merchant group began to meet regularly and study to develop an approach to revitalizing our downtown.

The study group included Skip Seaman from the chamber, Jennifer Thompson, Goodyear Florist, Wanda May, The Book Shelf, Mark Maxwell the Tryon public works director, Ronnie Reid, First Citizens Bank, and Nancy Holmes, Upstairs Gallery.

Out of these efforts came a name change to the Tryon Downtown Development Association. TDDA began to forge a strong relationship with the Town of Tryon and to seek investors who would commit to restoring Tryon to its rightful place as wonderful destination and place to live, shop, work, play and be entertained.

TDDA began to diligently follow the method prescribed by The North Carolina Main Street Program within the state Commerce Department. The NC Main Street Program gives towns a holistic approach to developing and maintaining a viable economy. It emphasizes four “building blocks;” promotion, design, economic restructuring and organization.

The gospel is that you must give equal attention to all four components if you are to be successful. A major milestone was reached when TDDA was awarded status as an official Small Town Main Street program.

Early on TDDA raised thousands of dollars to hire a professional architectural and engineering firm to develop a master plan.

TDDA also sought and won tax-exempt status as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. Public involvement was sought at every point. Creative ideas and excitement developed. Phase I of the plan included TDDA and Town of Tryon collaboration on a huge grant from NCDOT (which we won!).

This first big award allowed us to bury the overhead lines, install new street lights and start the sidewalk redesign.

One of the centerpieces of the Downtown Tryon Master Plan was the conversion of the property at the corner of Trade and Maple, into a fabulous pedestrian plaza and retail area.

With the completion of this new hard-surface and business project one of the biggest dreams has come true for the group that met 20 years ago to start the process. Everyone who has been involved is to be congratulated. This is a huge accomplishment!

This business of revitalizing a downtown is a life-long process, not a project. One must be ever vigilant and make sure relationships and bridges are built which foster public-private investment. Merchants contribute by boosting the promotion efforts. Tryon gets lot of good press through a variety of media.

Businesses and non-profits alike provide visitors and residents with a magical environment. All of our local architects have contributed greatly to our concepts and design ideas. Local citizens are strongly encouraged to be involved...all of us are needed to keep the momentum going.

Special contributions by St. Luke's Hospital have been critical along with unwavering support from The Polk County Community Foundation which has been with TDDA every step of the way. Their importance to this community cannot be overstated.

If you know people who have served on the TDDA Board, please thank them when you see them. After that, mail in your membership to TDDA, attend their meetings, get on one of their committees. This is your town and it is the best place I know of!

– Wanda K. May, Tryon