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Signs of the times

Both the "going out of business" sign on Pauline's Fashions and the old Frigidaire sign (right) show signs of decay in downtown Raeford. Vacant buildings line both sides of Main Street Raeford. Signs pasted to the windows (left) look unattractive and verify the emptying out of merchants that is gradually taking place. According to Chamber of Commerce Director Earl Fowler, these are the "danger signs" that indicate the coming of a dried up "ghost town."

Procrastination Dealing Slow Death To Downtown

Editor's Note: This is the first part of a three-part series on downtown revitalization.

By Sherry Matthews

Revitalizing or "refreshing" the looks of downtown Raeford is an issue that has been brewing among merchants, residents, property owners and city officials for the past six years.

Although some improvements are being made, it is easy to see that downtown Raeford could soon become a dried-up ghost town.

Vacant buildings are springing up along both sides of Main Street. Dirt lots, which are overgrown with weeds, are becoming eyesores.

"Going out of business" or "We've Moved" signs are being posted on both ends of the street. "The distress signals" have been flashing for a number of years," Chamber of Commerce Director Earl Fowler said.

"Look around Main Street. The Ford building is empty. Go down a little further, and there is another empty space; go a little bit further and there is a store going out of business," Fowler said, adding that these "distress signals" indicate something needs to be done.

These danger signals are creating a "false impression" about downtown Raeford, Fowler said.

"Raeford is a viable place to do business, but we have got to prove that to shoppers. We have got to make Raeford an attractive place to shop," the Chamber director added.

Filling the empty buildings is the first step, he said.

The Hoke-Raeford Merchants Association in conjunction with the Chamber is attempting to get those buildings filled, Association President Ed Hasty said.

"We are trying to seek tenants for these empty buildings," Hasty said.

In addition to moving in new tenants, Hasty feels that the merchants and property owners should "clean-up" the appearance of the downtown stores.

"We have got to spend a little money to make money," he said.

"Merchants have got to work together. One person cannot do it alone," Hasty added.

For Hasty, cleaning up the town's appearance includes painting the outside of buildings, removing old signs that remain on the buildings although the businesses have changed, and repairing or improving awnings.

"Sure it will cost some money, but it will not take a whole hip pocket," Hasty said.

"Raeford is dropping store after store. It is drying up before our eyes, and we have the ability to prevent it," Hasty added.

John Howard, owner of Howard Clothiers, agrees with Hasty.

"Revitalizing Raeford, as I see it, is a necessity," Howard said.

According to Howard, property owners are one of the drawbacks to getting things started.

"There are too many property owners who are lagging in personal interest," Howard said, adding that many were not interested in making a "commitment to the community."

"A large bulk of the movement will have to be initiated by the property owners before we can get revitalization off the ground," Treasure Chest owner Brad Turley said.

Most merchants seem to agree that the property owners need to get behind the "freshening up" process.

"For revitalization to work, we have all got to get behind it a hundred percent," Hasty said.

"We need leadership that will cause things to happen," Howard said.

"We are sitting around letting it happen, and we have got to quit being complacent and settled," Hasty added.

"Change is not a bad thing," Hasty said.

Raeford has changed and improved in recent years, according to City Manager Ron Matthews.

A new library has been built on Main Street and the Baptist Church has built a new sanctuary, Matthews said, noting that these things have given Raeford a "better look."

"In the last seven years, between three and four million dollars have been spent on improving the looks of the downtown area," Matthews said.

"We have seen an anchoring on both ends of Main Street; we just need to fill in the middle," Matthews said.

Matthews refers to the anchors as being the new city and county offices, the library, the nearly completed Production Credit offices and the Baptist Church sanctuary.

"There have been a lot of things happening, but they need to continue to happen. We have got to progress and not digress," Matthews said.

In addition to those improvements, the new Raeford-Hoke Village is completed and apparently attracting some business into the area.

"The shopping center has helped bring out of town and maybe even out of county people into Raeford," Fowler said.

"I don't think it has hurt the

downtown merchants," Matthews said.

Retail sales figures for Hoke County apparently prove Matthews' point.

April's retail sales figures for Hoke increased \$811,444 over last year's tally.

During May, sales were even higher reaching \$4.4 million which was an increase of \$1.1 million over the previous year.

"Retail sales are growing by approximately one-half million dollars a month," Fowler said.

According to Fowler, bringing in another shopping center would not "necessarily" be detrimental to downtown merchants.

"If additional sales were not coming in, another shopping center would hurt. It would spread things too thin," Fowler said.

According to Fowler and Matthews, shopping centers only "complement" the downtown stores.

"More people are staying here to shop and that is a big help," Matthews said.

Despite the verbal support for rehabilitating downtown, little has been done since efforts began.

"Some things have been accomplished, but not nearly enough has been done yet," Fowler said.

Moves to enhance downtown Raeford have been discussed and planned for nearly six years.

In 1978, the city council approved the funding for a downtown revitalization study and a completed design and recommendation package was presented to the Raeford body and the merchants.

Through the efforts of Townscape Incorporated in Raleigh and architect Peter Batchelor, a detailed study and design concept sketch was made of Raeford.

"I took the better part of four years to complete that study, and now it is sitting around gathering dust," Batchelor said.

"I know it takes money and great effort to pull a thing like this off, but it seems that nobody has made any move towards getting changes underway," Batchelor added.

According to Batchelor, revitalizing Raeford could be "started" in two phases.

"First, Raeford needs some decent off-street parking spaces. Then the merchants need to begin renovating their buildings," Batchelor said.

"There is a tremendous amount of unsightly canopies and awnings hanging from these buildings and they do absolutely nothing for downtown's appearance," Batchelor added.

Although Batchelor knows what the problems are, he readily admits that he can not initiate the solution.

"A person like myself cannot do it. I can assist in getting the job done, but someone else must initiate this thing," Batchelor said.

"Raeford needs a community leader who would be entirely committed to the project, and who could inspire others to get behind his efforts," Batchelor added.

The architect also feels that people want to see immediate results that are not always easy to produce.

"A project like this cannot be done quickly. It is not a simple make-up job," Batchelor said, adding that with a "little work" something could be started "inside a year."

"It will take some three to five years to see any noticeable improvements," Batchelor said.

"Minor changes will become visible within a year, but signifi-

cant changes will take time," Batchelor added.

Batchelor also admits that his "plans" for downtown Raeford will cost.

"I would say an economic estimate for renovations to each city block would run close to \$1 million," Batchelor said.

"That is really a low level investment compared to other parts of the country, but even then it is a great deal," Batchelor said.

"It does not have to be done all at once. The impact of improvements can be spread over a period of time," Batchelor added.

"If this town puts its heart into this project, it could make a tremendous difference in land value. In 10 years local lands could be worth 10 to 12 times what it is worth now," Batchelor said.

Although Batchelor apparently has a good plan for "a better Raeford", he believes people are not really ready to make the commitment to the project.

"People want to see something happen quickly, especially if they have invested money," Batchelor said.

"With revitalization, things will happen, but they will not be apparent within a week or two and it will cost money," Batchelor added.

Money seems to be a big part of getting revitalization underway.

"People don't want to spend any money to get things started," Batchelor said.

Turley and other merchants agree.

"Renters are not financially able to initiate such a large project, alone," Turley said.

"It will take both the owner's and the merchants cooperation to get something started," Turley added.



Merchant involvement

Raeford Merchants, who hang their shingle on Main Street, are willing to get downtown revitalization going, but still progress seems slow or stalled. While they wait, merchants try and attract shoppers through sidewalk sales that offer lower prices on quality merchandise.



Main Street -- Raeford

A view of Main Street shows old buildings, cracked paint and antique signs that need replacing with more modern fixtures. "This is a viable place to shop, it just needs to be more appealing to shoppers," Fowler said.