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Main Street program has big impact

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PORTLAND - The Portland City Council received an update on the accomplishments of the Main Street program at its Nov. 2 meeting.

Kathy Parsons, chairperson of the Main Street Design & Development Committee, made a presentation that showed the changes made to the downtown area since the city was selected for the Main Street program in 2003.

"One of the first things that we did was meld the downtown facade improvement program with a facade design services program through MSHDA," said Parsons. "This provided funding for downtown building owners to improve the facades of their buildings."

Parsons said seven facade projects had been completed with one or two more still in progress.

Another key improvement highlights by Parsons was the boardwalk and riverside facade improvements.

"The city received one of the first Cool City grants for \$100,000 for the boardwalk," said Parsons. "Then the Downtown Development Authority and MSHDA also contributed to the project."

The project added a walkway along the Grand River at the back of businesses in the 100 block of Kent Street. It also allowed the business owners to improve the appearance of the back side of those buildings.

"Businesses were also allowed to add an entrance off of the boardwalk," said Parsons. "They could also place tables and chairs on the boardwalk, so it has provided an opportunity to increase business downtown."

Another benefit of the boardwalk was the addition of loft apartments above businesses in the 100 block of Kent Street.

"The boardwalk allowed some of the building owners to put in an additional apartment because the boardwalk provided a second egress area," said Parsons.

Patrick Reagan, manager of the Portland Main Street program, said the apartments are very popular.

Apartments

"Every one of those apartments is occupied and there is a waiting list of people who want to get in," said Reagan.

The recently completed Maple Street enhancement project was also highlighted.

"This was a collaborative effort between Main Street, the DDA, the city, and Fleis & Vandenbrink Engineering," said Parsons. "We went by a streetscape master plan that was developed in 2005 and also sought input from the public and business owners."

Parsons added that the project took place sooner than expected due to failing utilities under the street.

"The storm sewer and water lines were the impetus for doing this project now," said Parsons. "Some of those lines were 70 years old or more and needed to be replaced right away."

Streetscape

Parsons said the project followed the streetscape master plan and was designed for appearance and safety. "What you see at the intersection of Bridge and Maple is used to calm traffic and improve safety for pedestrians," said Parsons.

"The pedestrian walkways and sidewalk are identified by their color. There are bump-outs at the corners to keep traffic farther separated from the pedestrians. And the pillars help separate pedestrians from parking lot traffic," she said.

Parsons said the majority of the funds used in the project came from state and federal enhancement grants.

"The city only provided 20 percent of the funds used in the Maple Street reconstruction," said Parsons.

State notice

Reagan said the efforts of the Main Street program are being noticed around the state.

"In the time that I have been here I have brought in five or six colleagues to look at what we have done and all of them are impressed," said Reagan. "They just marvel at the boardwalk and can't believe that a city this size could have something like that. They are just very impressed with what we have done and I think it shows that we are moving in the right direction."

Council members also praised the efforts of the Main Street members.

"The two of you, and all of the Main Street volunteers, do such a great service to this community," said Council member Robert Baldyga. "Things like what is taking place in our downtown don't just happen. It takes a lot of effort by a group of people to make it happen."
