

THE TIMES

Taking it to the street

on 02-06-2008 02:19



Ramon Martinez, left, president and CEO of Progreso Latino, discusses the Broad Street revitalization initiative as mayors Daniel McKee, James Doyle and Charles Moreau listen. The mayors of Cumberland, Pawtucket and Central Falls met at the Blackstone River Theatre in Cumberland Tuesday to announce the joint effort. Times photo/Butch Adams

By VINAYA SAKSENA

CUMBERLAND— The mayors of Pawtucket, Central Falls and Cumberland joined other community leaders and local business owners to unveil a plan that, if successful, would give the shared Broad Street corridor a new and lasting lease on life.

The communities applied for and recently received a shared \$50,000 grant from Preserve America, a federal initiative designed to encourage use and preservation of historic areas throughout the country. The town and two cities that share Broad Street have also been named Preserve America Communities, a designation recognizing municipalities “that protect and celebrate their heritage, use their historic assets for economic development and community revitalization, and encourage people to experience and appreciate local historic resources through education and heritage tourism programs,” according to the official Web site of the Preserve America initiative.

On Tuesday, the mayors joined Blackstone Valley Tourism Council President Bob Billington in a press conference to tout the initiative and explain how work on it would begin. They said the neighborhood had suffered a long period of economic stagnancy, and that the time had come to begin turning it into a viable economic hub for the long term.

“I drove up there this morning, and my first reaction was, ‘there is a lot of need here,’ and probably just as much in (Central Falls and Cumberland),” Pawtucket Mayor James Doyle said. “It could stand a revitalization business-wise, (population)-wise and it could stand some work rejuvenating the infrastructure.”

Ramon Martinez, president of the advocacy group Progreso Latino, said he hoped the area could duplicate the success it had as a hub of the Industrial Revolution, but perhaps in a different manner, alluding to ideas Cumberland Mayor Daniel McKee had generated.

“What we seem to have is strength in numbers,” Martinez said. “This could be the birthplace of the American Education Revolution.”

McKee has recently proposed educational initiatives including a regional Blackstone Valley academy that would serve area communities.

The grant money will be used to fund a study on how to breathe life into Broad Street.

The “Broad Street Regeneration Initiative” will be overseen by Alex Sommer, a University of Florida senior studying tourism and urban planning who is working on the initiative as a senior project.

Sommer said he became interested in what the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council was trying to do in the area and contacted them about lending a hand.

“I found them on the Internet, and they had such vision for sustainable development,” Sommer said. “They had such vision, I had to apply. This project is really historic, because the plans don’t come from the top, the plans come from within the community, and that’s what makes it sustainable.”

Central Falls Mayor Charles Moreau pointed out that in addition to the overall improvement of Broad Street, the communities were trying to initiate smaller but significant improvements at the local level.

He cited discussions he and Doyle had undertaken to bring a new CVS store to the Broad Street area, as well as the possibility of a new train station in Central Falls and the improved appearance of park land in Cumberland.

“You’ve really got to be a little nuts to do what we’re doing,” Moreau said. “I look forward to working with all of (you).”

Billington pointed out that the revitalization of Broad Street would not happen overnight, but would be a gradual process spread over the course of up to 20 years. He added that the ultimate goal would be to expand the revitalization beyond one narrow strip of road.

“Please don’t think anything is going to be done visually soon,” Billington said. “Be patient and be involved. It’s all three cities that we’re going to take a look at in the long term, not just Broad Street.”

Several of those involved said they hoped their efforts would encourage other communities — or groups of communities — to undertake similar actions. McKee said such joint efforts would likely be a necessity for many communities in Rhode Island and beyond in the future, and that state residents should therefore get used to thinking outside their hometown borders — be they urban or suburban.

“Rhode Island is not an island,” McKee said. “No longer can we separate ourselves and (think) what’s happening in our community doesn’t impact other communities.”