

Key to city revitalization has three parts

Designer to offer recommendations Wednesday

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BRIAN WALKER

More than 110 pages of reports, figures, graphs, maps, charts and other information will be the final fruit of the months of labor Rick Hill and his company spent on the Bardstown Revitalization project.

And Hill isn't pulling any punches.

He said the only things standing in the way of a vibrant, reinvigorated, attractive downtown Bardstown are leadership, current laws and regulations and an identity crisis.

Without changes in attitudes and procedures, Bardstown will never be able to take his suggestions and use them, Hill said.

As owner of Village Solutions, his company is tasked with handing the community a report on how to overhaul the town's image, appearance and usage. A native of Bardstown, Hill is based in the city of Anchorage, just outside Louisville.

He will reveal his preliminary plans at the latest in a series of public Bardstown meetings at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday at Kreso's Restaurant. He stressed the plans shown to *The Kentucky Standard* recently and to be revealed at Wednesday's meeting aren't the final draft and should be viewed as "preliminary concepts in refinement."

Hill's firm was hired late last year and paid \$94,000 by the city, county and some local corporations. He has worked on similar projects in St. Paul, Minn., and Miami.

In the project Hill enlisted the public by literally asking them at public meetings to draw, write, design and explain their wishes and dreams for the future.

"Bardstown is historical and that is wonderful. But what part of the history is the era to make the focus and concentration?" Hill said. "The city has already existing components that are from more than 200 years of history."

If elected officials are not willing to listen to his and other experts ideas for loosening restrictions on some types of projects, then Bardstown will not have a chance to expand on the still healthy downtown it has, he said.

"It's irresponsible to not strengthen downtown while it still can be," he said. "It's a wonderful plan that has excited a lot of people. But the leadership of this community must get behind it and keep the obstacles out of the way."

Limiting the ability of newly constructed buildings, parks and other projects to resemble something historical, but blatantly modern in design is a mistake, he said. He cited the various frontages throughout the city that used to easily date when a building was constructed.

"With no uniformity from block to block, there has to be a rethinking on how to square things up and make them appear more uniform," Hill said. "What will Bardstown be like in 10, 20 or 30 years?"

With the majority of the Nelson County population living outside the downtown Bardstown area and most of the retail trade inside the city limits, the lack of balance between the two is disheartening, he said. With a downtown drastically losing its focus, the soul is leaving too, Hill said.

He cites several factors that he believes have made downtown less vibrant in very recent years. Among them, moving the location of the new Nelson County Justice Center away from the city core and Flaget Memorial Hospital building well outside the downtown have contributed to the problem.

"Bardstown is at a crossroads right now," he said. "Plans to build a stronger city core and create an overall stronger market have to be made now."

Another factor having a negative impact on the county's economy is the amount of dollars being lost to Hardin and Jefferson Counties by local shoppers. Hill said current estimates put the figure at roughly \$50 million a year being spent by Nelson County consumers

going to neighboring areas for entertainment, vehicle purchases and retail shopping. Some reasons for shopping elsewhere are the things consumers are after either aren't available locally or aren't present at competitive levels.

Some of the new ideas Hill will reveal at Wednesday's meeting will include plans to make the Courthouse Square more of an actual "square". Building a small wall, walkways and creative landscaping on the corner with the monument to native John Fitch would tighten the look and feel, he said. Creating new structures behind the Talbott Tavern and in the space between other historic buildings on the square would give it the look it should have had for decades and is sorely lacking currently, Hill said.

Using available space in the 16 blocks in the plan and nearby streets would be less expensive for builders, owners and utility companies too. He gave a figure that work in outlying, undeveloped areas traditionally runs at least four times more expensive than staying in a core development area.

"The infrastructure is already in place and it only makes sense to build to a higher density inside the city and less outside it," Hill said.