

FCCAA taking steps to improve Uniontown

By: HERALD STANDARD STAFF Herald Standard

Fayette County Community Action Agency Inc. (FCCAA) and its partnering community groups are taking steps to make Uniontown a better place for people to live, work and raise their families.

FCCAA employees recently led representatives from community groups in a discussion about developing a unified vision for "building sustainable communities" in Uniontown.

About 20 people attended a meeting at the East End United Community Center to review the history and collaboration of sustainable communities, report on last year's progress and review a draft for a quality of life plan and vision for Uniontown.

Representatives of the Uniontown Police Department, Westmoreland County Community College, Lafayette Concerned Citizens Group, East End Concerned Citizens Group, Penn State Fayette, Fay-Penn Economic Development Council, the Weed and Seed program, Elm Street program and East End United Community Center gave reports on their programs.

"Building Sustainable Communities" is a nonprofit initiative of the Local Initiative Support Corp. (LISC) designed to target investment and resources into specific distressed areas in an effort to bring change.

"It's a way of transforming disadvantaged places into healthy, vibrant places that are sought after by people who want to stay there and live, work and raise their families," said James M. Stark, Community Action's chief executive officer.

In 2000, Stark said a partnership agreement was reached between the Rural LISC program and FCCAA. Since then, LISC has approved the investment of more than \$6.8 million in Uniontown, resulting in total development costs of an estimated \$62 million.

At the end of 2007, Stark said Uniontown was selected as Rural LISC's demonstration site for LISC's Building Sustainable Communities Initiative in western Pennsylvania. Uniontown is one of the original 11 demonstration sites in the nation.

Rural LISC has awarded grants, loans and lines of credit to FCCAA. With this funding, Stark said FCCAA has developed affordable homes for low-income people, created community and commercial space, established local businesses and created and retained jobs.

A medical and dental clinic for the uninsured and underinsured was reopened on the FCCAA campus through an agreement reached last year with Cornerstone Care Inc., according to Stark.

He said other initiatives include summertime and after-school education, health fairs and adult education, as well as additional programs and projects.

"It's very ambitious to see a vision for Uniontown," said Joe Yarzebinski of Rural LISC who also attended the meeting. "Everybody is sort of doing their own thing, but we want to unify the plan and bring everybody together. We're looking to create partnerships, getting the word out and telling our story about Uniontown."

Stark and Yarzebinski plan to attend LISC's 30th Anniversary Leadership Symposium & Gala March 23-25 in Washington, D.C., where they will have an opportunity to tell Uniontown's story through a video and narrative presentation. President Barack Obama has been invited to attend.

"People in Uniontown know what's going on in their community, but we need to get the word out to other areas and let people know what's happening in Uniontown," Yarzebinski said.

The Building Sustainable Communities program places an emphasis on quality-of-life plans developed by residents. Stark said Uniontown plans to unify existing plans and to partner with existing agencies to work on individual plans and complete projects/programs.

As part of the planning process, Stark said there are five program objectives that can lead to the larger goal of comprehensive community health and sustainability.

Those goals are:

n Developing, preserving and investing in the physical environment - expanding and investing in housing and other real estate

development.

n Increasing family wealth and income.

n Stimulating and connecting economic activity, locally and regionally.

n Improving access to quality education.

n Fostering and supporting livable, safe and healthy environments and lifestyles.

Stark said FCCAA is in the process of completing Uniontown Senior Housing, a 36-unit apartment complex on Gallatin Avenue at the site where the American Legion had been located.

An estimated \$16 million was invested in Uniontown Family Homes where 30 homes were built for low-income families. Another 28 homes are expected to be built in Uniontown Family Homes II, according to Stark.

Stark said blighted homes were torn down on Maple Street, where three new homes are currently under construction by Threshold Development Corp., a spin-off company of FCCAA and Community Action Southwest. A total of 10 houses will be built on that street.

The new East End United Community Center was recently completed, he said.

Stark said FCCAA is looking into the possibility of creating a Financial Opportunity Center that would help families to increase their wealth and to save money.

Job creation is the goal at the Republic Food Enterprise Center where Robin Cole's Unforgettable Sweets is currently located and cheesecake is produced, according to Stark.

He said the access to quality education has been increased at Penn State Fayette, The Eberly Campus, and Westmoreland County Community College.

"We've made some good progress and created some good opportunities, but we still have high unemployment," Stark said. "That's an issue that must be resolved as we move forward with this plan because employment plays a vital role in creating sustainable communities."

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