



Chamber Puts Stamp On Revitalization Project

Valley Group Unveils Logo, Announces It's Taking Proposals For Urban Renewal Grants

By Jeanne Bonner

An expanding philanthropic arm of the Greater Lehigh Valley Chamber of Commerce will begin soliciting proposals for its first round of urban renewal grants next week.

The Chamber's foundation will accept applications for 10 \$3,000 grants from Dec. 8 to Dec. 31. The group is seeking to award grants to community revitalization and improvement proposals as part of an ambitious project it launched this year. The group plans to raise \$4 million for use in the Valley's cities and boroughs.

In conjunction with its announcement next week that it will accept applications, the foundation will also unveil a name and a logo for its campaign. It will be called Valley Vision 2015, said Tom Micelotta, who's with National Community Development Services, a fundraising company the Chamber hired to work with the foundation.

The request for applications is one of the first concrete steps the Chamber's foundation is taking as part of the campaign. The foundation has also agreed to be the authorized fiscal agent for Bethlehem's Elm Street program, a state-funded initiative that seeks to revitalize older neighborhoods near downtowns.

"The goal of the foundation is improving urban cores and that's exactly what the Elm Street program is about," Bethlehem Mayor John Callahan said.

The foundation has also said it will provide \$5,000 toward a \$50,000 parking study Bethlehem wants to undertake. The city is looking at parking options as the number of people visiting shops on Main Street increases, but available parking spots remain scarce. The Chamber has already been involved in downtown improvement programs. Now it wants to take a wider role in reducing storefront vacancies, boosting the number of jobs downtown and fostering a better mix of businesses in the Valley's downtowns.

The Chamber's leaders see revitalization of the Valley's cities and boroughs as a moral and economic imperative. The Valley's population and economy have grown at a near-record pace this decade, but most of the expansion has occurred in suburban office parks and housing subdivisions.

Between 1998 and 2007, the collective tax base of the region's three main cities grew 4.2 percent. By contrast, the tax base of all of the Valley's townships grew 39 percent in that period, according to assessment data gathered by the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission.

The Chamber also sees it as a logical segue to the organization's push to become the regional voice of the business community. The organization, originally the Allentown Chamber of Commerce, spent the late 1990s and the early part of this decade merging with smaller chambers and other business groups. With 4,800 members, it's now the second-largest chamber in the state.

Micelotta said a committee will review the proposals for grant money and rate them according to five criteria that include improving the stability of the community; promoting economic and/or community development; and assisting in downtown business attraction, retention and expansion. Organizations that are eligible include municipalities, industrial development authorities and nonprofit groups. Future rounds of grants will dole out larger amounts of money.

The current fundraising target of \$4 million is more than double the Chamber's initial estimate made in March. The more ambitious figure emerged after a feasibility study this summer found strong support for a wider role for the Chamber in urban revitalization.