

Perspective of Economic Development Needs.....Debbie Buckley, Economic Dev. Dir.

When I first began working for the City of Fort Thomas, I often had meetings with people from all over town to find out what they thought the City needed. I had a copy of the 1999 Comprehensive Plan which was completed a few years prior. That plan suggested several things: a bakery, a bookstore, a coffee shop, more retail, more restaurants, etc. A plan that, twenty years ago, also spoke of the need to redevelop certain parts of our business districts that weren't working.

I heard daily how the people of Fort Thomas didn't support the local businesses. I was determined we could fix that problem if we provided the right mix of businesses—businesses that were so exciting our people couldn't help but come and support. I also heard that a lot of people went across the River to shop. Of course, we all suffer from “the grass is greener” syndrome. Renaissance turned that phrase around. We planned events that enticed others to come to Fort Thomas. Our grass became the greener grass. People began coming to Fort Thomas, seeing our businesses and shopping and eating. More businesses opened. Very soon I began hearing another issue. We didn't have enough storefronts. Our storefronts weren't ADA compliant. The available buildings in the Central Business District (the Towne Center) were houses that sat too far back from the road or had too many steps. Many of the businesses in these buildings have had trouble surviving for these reasons.

Another frequent complaint was our lack of in-between housing for Baby Boomers. I heard it over and over again. Adults who were selling their large homes and wanting to downsize--we began losing Boomers to other communities because they wanted condos near the heart of the city. They wanted to be near their restaurants, stores, and the drugstore. They wanted to watch their grandchildren walk to and from school. They wanted to be able to walk around the busiest part of the city. Repeatedly people told me they were leaving Fort Thomas because we didn't have the type of housing they were looking for. The Arcadia folks in Alexandria must love Fort Thomas. I was asked to do something about it. They didn't want to leave.

As Economic Development Director, I had three problems. I needed more retail. I needed condos for senior adults. Both needed to be in the same general area. I had an area that was depressed with a building (15 North) that struggled to be a restaurant. I had another building (19 North) that we simply couldn't sell or rent. Believe me. I showed that building numerous times and couldn't lease it or sell it. The bank owned it for years. Another owner tried. It was simply not a good building for commercial use, and it has stood empty for nine of the last ten years. More recently Fort Thomas Central relocated to the Midway District and BB&T informed us they were leaving Fort Thomas. Something has to be done.

I formed a task force several years ago. This group toured other communities to see how they tackled this issue. We talked to mayors, economic development directors and developers. We brought some of them to Fort Thomas to look over our city. They were

quite gracious in their assessment, and to a person, they acknowledged where our weaknesses lie. Our city is land-locked. In order to provide the housing and compliant retail space we want, we need to redevelop what we already have.

As news of some of our redevelopment investigations started to come out recently, one of our citizens, Dan Gorman, received some unfair criticism. But I am grateful for him. He has been willing to use his personal money to help out Fort Thomas. When I asked him to consider purchasing 18 North Fort Thomas in order to save this landmark building, he didn't flinch. You may recall that prior to his purchase, Smitty's and Marshall Granger had lost their leases. Our business district was hurting. That building was nearly empty and there was nothing I could do because the owner was not from Fort Thomas and was not motivated to help. We had gone through a façade program in 2006 which helped the building look better on the outside, but it was big, vacant building. It took Dan a year to negotiate with the owner and he spent a lot of time and money working on it, and it was full within months.

Dan, true to his character, negotiated purchase options and bought properties as they became available on the other side of the street because the development group saw this as an important step in starting a process that had been discussed by our committee for years. He gave free rent to occupants. To be truthful, he has bled money over the last couple of years hoping to find a developer to create the type of housing/retail befitting Fort Thomas. Now is the time to redevelop. To make this happen, private citizens and businesses may need to come alongside the city, and I hope our community makes them feel welcome and appreciated.

Just three weeks ago a couple told me they never wanted to leave Fort Thomas. They just had to. They visit their children and grandchildren twice a week. Then they go home to Arcadia. Every week. Another gentleman told me he and his wife have been renting a home in Ohio because they couldn't find a condo here. When I explained what this development might be, he said, "This is exactly what we want!" I don't want to lose any more of our Baby Boomers to other communities.

I have told everyone since I came here that the difference between this city and others is that Fort Thomas expects excellence. We expect it in our schools, in our parks, in our streetscapes, in our sports. We should expect it in our business districts as well. The comprehensive plan speaks to the need. The people of the city who attended all those meetings and answered those surveys attested to the need. The many, many people who asked me to do something spoke to the need. It is time for us to re-develop.