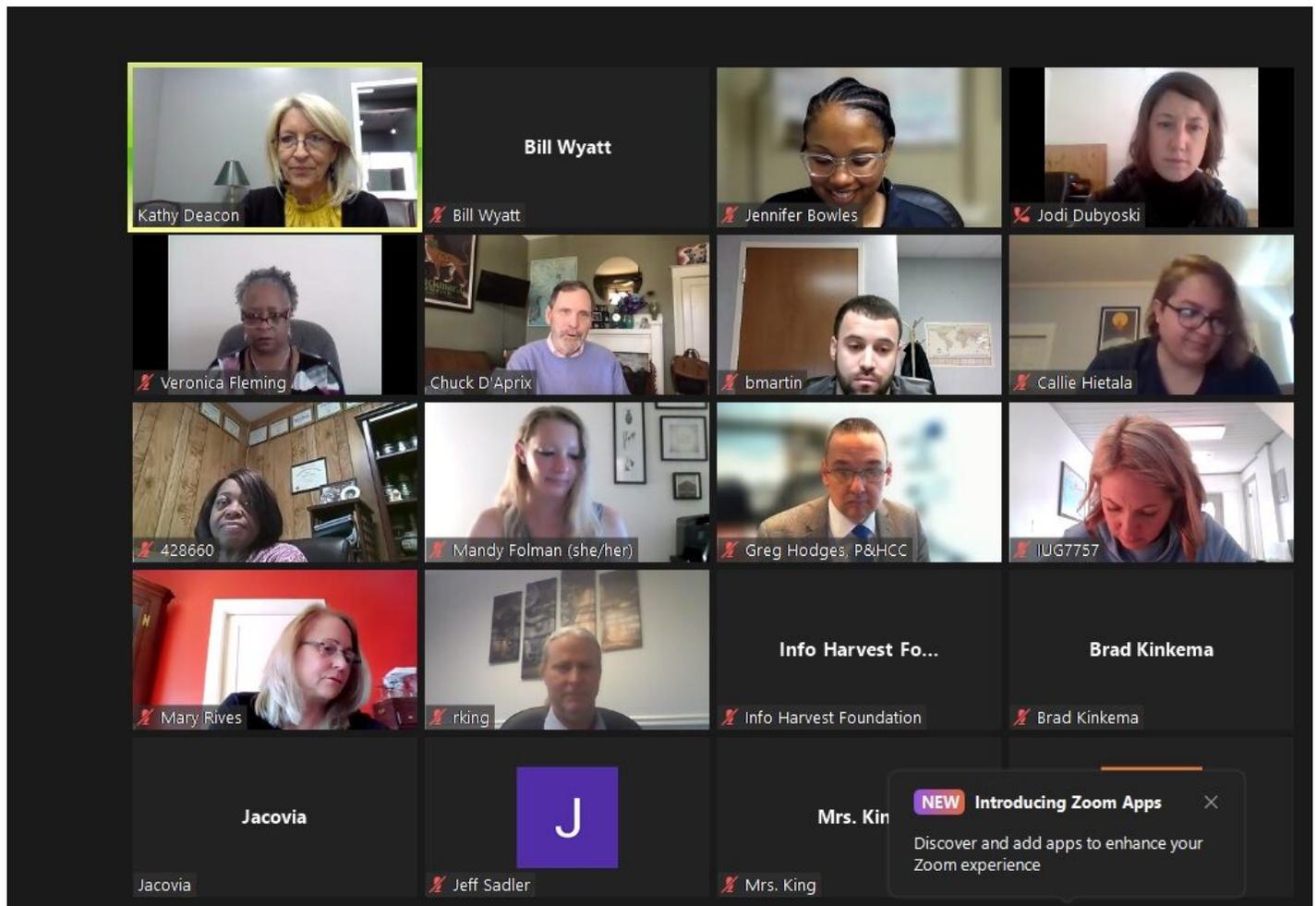


TOP STORY

Uptown Partnership reveals vision plan

Bill Wyatt

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The Uptown Partnership releases their vision plan for the uptown area of Martinsville in a virtual meeting on Friday. SCREENSHOT

Bill Wyatt

The Uptown Partnership unleashed an ambitious vision plan for revitalizing the uptown Martinsville area in a virtual presentation Friday morning.

Kathy Deacon, the Uptown Partnership executive director, said the information shared with 25 participants at the virtual event would be shared with the public next as part of a larger rollout followed by monthly meetings “so it’s their voice and their vision.”

Chuck D’Aprix with Downtown Economics in Richmond has been contracted to be the project director with funds through the Harvest Foundation. He walked everyone through a slide presentation on Friday.

“We conducted a deep dive into what the community desires for itself,” said D’Aprix. “Among the things we heard most were more two-way streets, gateways, streetscape improvements and a farmer’s market expansion.”

D’Aprix said his group met with people uptown, outside of Walmart in Henry County and at church meetings. He said he even went to Danville and talked with leaders there to find out what they would like to see in Martinsville.

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“This really serves as a basis for this vision,” said D’Aprix.

From door hangers to full newspaper ads driving people to a website to complete a survey, over 300 people responded, D’Aprix said.

The demographics presented of those surveyed showed 56% of the respondents were white and 38% were Black and while 55% were female, 44% were male.

Along with D'Arpax, Jodi Dubyoski a Richmond architect and researcher and Veronica Fleming of Community Engagement and Charrette Associates, also of Richmond, shared an hour-long presentation with the results they had gathered and then they presented a plan of action.

What they found

D'Arpax said his group discovered there was a need for places to gather, a desire to celebrate a more diverse narrative of history, a desire for more shopping and dining options, a need for more housing and amenities, a need to provide spaces for culturally diverse events and a desire to preserve the historic architecture.

“Racial divisions have affected the vitality of uptown with the legacy of the Martinsville Seven, a decline of the Fayette Street corridor, and New College Institute physically dividing the community,” said D'Arpax. “As a result, the Black community does not support the uptown business community in large numbers.

Seven Black men, often referred to as the “Martinsville Seven,” were executed in 1949 after being found guilty by an all-white jury of raping a woman. Last year former Governor Ralph Northam posthumously pardoned the men saying they were denied due process because of race.

The vision

Fleming said the plan of action included recommendations to actively promote diversity, inclusion, equity and anti-racism.

The plan calls for the implementation of strategies to ensure that all voices are heard, “regardless of race, age, gender identity, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation,” said Fleming.

The design

Dubyoski had taken pictures of the uptown area and superimposed suggested design changes.



This is a redesign illustration of Walnut Street as a pedestrian thoroughfare closed to cars.

Courtesy photos: Uptown Partnership

Dubyoski said the largest trees in the uptown area currently provide shade for parked cars but they should also be there for the benefit of people, so she suggested converting half of the parking lot at Main and Bridge Streets to a grassy park with a small amphitheater.

“This would provide a place for food trucks to gather, and provides the perfect location for an evening of family fun,” said Dubyoski.

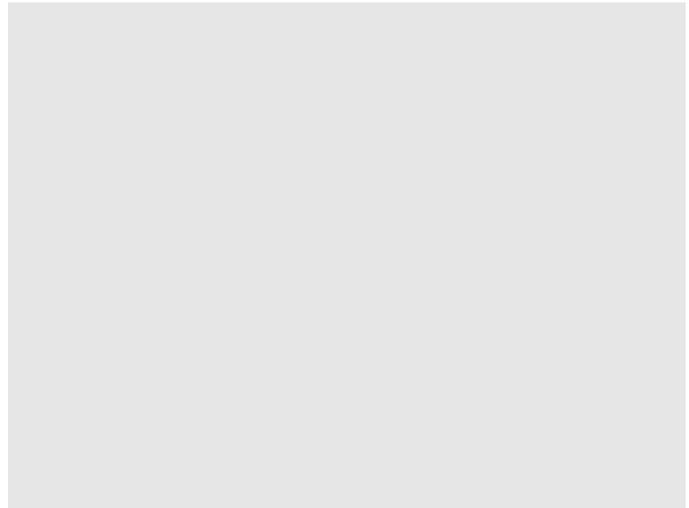
A large civic park was proposed in Dubyoski’s design plans in the large city block between Church and Market streets and Ellsworth Street and Cleveland Avenue.

The Fayette Street corridor “links the historically Black business district with the rest of uptown,” said Dubyoski. “This is a prime location for space dedicated to supporting Black-owned small business and entrepreneurs.”

The past meets the future

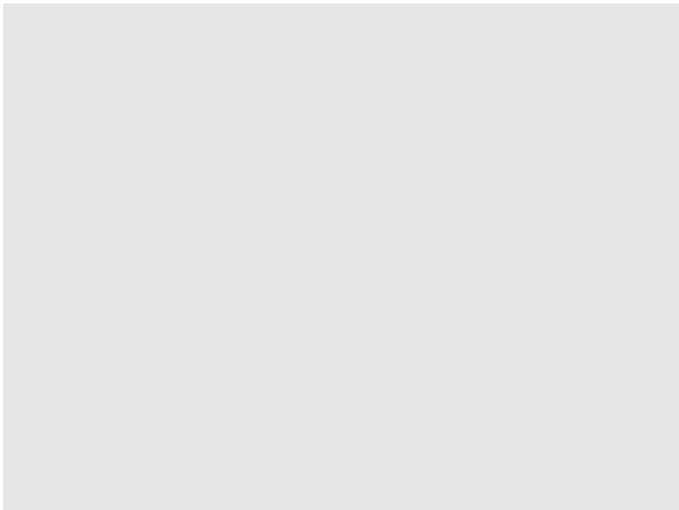
Among her suggestions were to convert Church and Main streets to two-way streets, close Walnut Street to cars, create an additional pedestrian connection between Church and Main streets, create a new bikeway along Main and Fayette streets and connect it with the Dick and Willie Passage Rail Trail with a new bike lane on Ford Street.

As part of a green space master plan,



This is a redesign illustration of streetscape improvements to Main Street with upgrades to historic buildings in the background.

Courtesy: Uptown Partnership

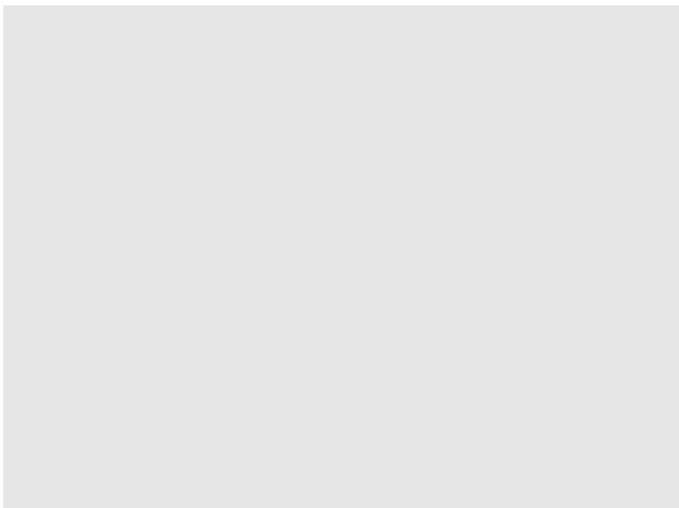


This is a redesign illustration of proposed streetscape improvements to Fayette Street.

Courtesy: Uptown Partnership

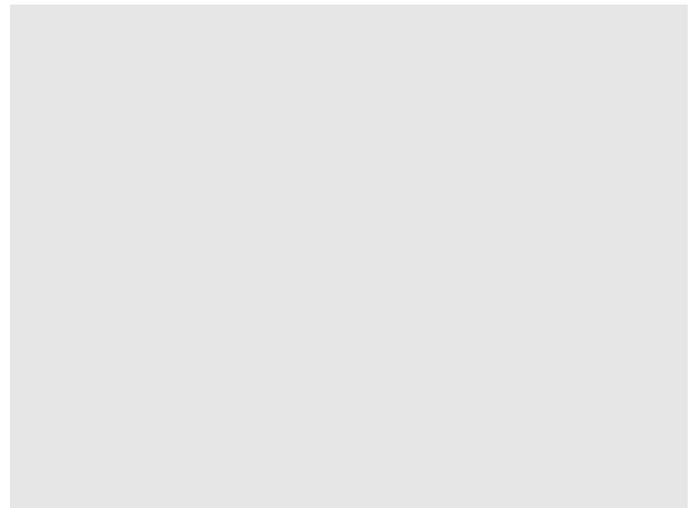
recommendations educating building owners about historic preservation,” said D’Aprix.

With historic preservation in mind, D’Aprix said the uptown area should be branded as the future center of entrepreneurship with the creation of an “entrepreneurship village” including a new building for entrepreneurs at the corner of Fayette and Market Streets.”



D’Aprix said that Martinsville has not made historic preservation a priority in the past and to do so would “encourage economic development, support tourism, encourage reinvestment and ensure environmental sustainability.”

“Many of the buildings in uptown can be preserved and restored, and we have provided several



This is a redesign illustration of the parking lot at Main and Bridge Streets to a grassy park with a small amphitheater where there are currently stairs.

Courtesy: Uptown Partnership

Pop-up stores, street vendors, a community kitchen and heavy support for minority business ownership should be established, he said.

While the Martinsville Farmer’s Market has enthusiastic vendors, D’Aprix said there were relatively few

This is a redesign illustration of Fayette Street at Jones Street in front of the Martinsville Hotel.

Courtesy: Uptown Partnership

participants and the lot “remains relatively unwelcoming.”

Examples that will work

D’Aprix said the uptown area of Martinsville was ripe for a microbrewery, pizza and sandwich shop, a bakery and a distillery. Other businesses tapped to succeed included a day spa, tech repair shop, pet grooming store, antique store, gift boutiques, a visitor’s kiosk and an online selling facilitation center.

These additions would compliment the already successful Piedmont Arts Association and Virginia Museum of Natural History nearby, said D’Aprix.

Leadership recommendations

Fleming said in order to “create an ongoing, multi-layered, racially and culturally diverse community engagement process, the Harvest Foundation should hire an experienced community engagement professional to work out of the Harvest Foundation headquarters on East Church Street, and a full-time community engagement professional should be hired to work out of the Uptown Partnership offices on Franklin Street.

“And we need to establish a steering committee for implementation of this vision,” said Fleming.

Deacon said in an email after the presentation that her organization would “be moving quickly toward the establishment of the steering committee and prioritizing action items from the recommendations.”

The Uptown Partnership is slated to provide an update on their plans to Martinsville City Council at a regular meeting on Tuesday at 7 p.m.

Said Deacon: “We look forward to working with all of you to create an Uptown commercial district that is welcoming to all and is a thriving community where people want to live, work and play.”

Bill Wyatt is a reporter for the Martinsville Bulletin. He can be reached at 276-638-8801, Ext. 2360. Follow him @billdwytatt.

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