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EDA Is “All About Helping People Succeed”

By Michael Stein

There are not many towns the size of Barnesville that can boast of an economic development authority (EDA) such as we have here.

The Barnesville EDA, said Director Karen Lauer, “Is all about helping people succeed.” Recently completed and ongoing projects are proof of that.

One of the EDA’s most recent projects has been the sale of the Gunness Building to a private developer who, over the next year, will be renovating the building to look much like it did in 1899 when it was first constructed.

“Over the years the Gunness Building has been home to a wide variety of products and services,” Lauer said. “It’s been a grocery store, a Ben Franklin store, a hardware store, and most recently a bar and grill.”

When the building went into tax forfeiture, the EDA took advantage of the opportunity to acquire the property and develop a plan to get an appropriate business or businesses into the space.

Through long and extensive efforts by Barnesville’s Economic Development Authority, the Gunness Building on Front Street is undergoing renovation and will be the new headquarters for Stoneridge Software by January 2019.

“It’s a historic building with about 7,500 square feet,” Lauer said. “Our business committee studied who could use that space and whether it should be subdivided. As a result, we found a local developer who had an interest in renovating the building.”

Stoneridge Software, which recently has acquired Fargo Microsoft partner DFC Consultants, Ltd, and created a new technology company called Levridge, plans to move into the renovated Gunness Building space by early 2019.

While the Ben Franklin store and other retail shops are but a dim memory, the EDA is working to revitalize the retail sector.

“If we can get people to look to Barnesville businesses as their primary shopping venues, that would be significant; I’ve heard some say that many “use my store as they would a convenience store.” if they forget they forget to buy something in Fargo-Moorhead, they’ll pick it up here. We would like to reverse that way of thinking.”

Shopping at a big box store has no local impact, Lauer said. “When you buy locally, you help support not just that business owner, but the people employed there. You also help bring more tax dollars to the community, and that helps with a number of things, including our school.”

Lauer recently met with a group of new residents as a focus group. “I wanted to learn what attracted them to Barnesville. I was pleasantly surprised at their perception of local business. A common misperception is that everything costs more in a smaller community. They told me

they found that some things cost less here.”

“There are other misperceptions, such as a limited selection of goods. The EDA and the Main Street Program are working hard to counter these perceptions. Our business owners are committed to providing affordable options. A number of them are able and willing to order items they may not have on the shelf. Barnesville Grocery and Barnesville Drug and Hardware have demonstrated they are more than happy to order a special item for a customer. They really do listen to what Barnesville residents want.”

The EDA Board of Directors is a group of local folks who care about growing a vibrant community. “Our goals and vision center around growth,” Lauer said. That includes the population, the number of households, the tax base, the number of employees working in local businesses.”

The board consists of two strongly connected seven-member committees—housing and business.

“The housing committee’s primary effort is marketing,” Lauer said. “It studies ways to attract new people, whether that’s through radio, trade shows, print, social media and other means. We focus on young families with an eye on the schools. A strong school system makes for a strong healthy community.”

The EDA also tracks taxable values, the number of homes for

sale and sold in a given year, new construction and other related data.

“The housing committee was behind the effort that made Del Acres Gilbertson 2nd addition a reality,” Lauer said. “We are pleased that we have four new homes out there. Of those, all are families who moved from outside of Barnesville, which is a great sign of growth.”

The business committee is busy looking at ways to fill store fronts. Last year Main Street teamed up with the EDA to sponsor Saturday morning Business Opportunity Open House, which showcased the available buildings, spaces for purchase, lease or rent.

“Efforts like these help create awareness of our business community,” Lauer said. “We also did a public survey on what types of businesses people want here. Some of it is just talking to people.”

“As a result of a recent conversation, we have a person looking to possibly open a laundromat here. We have available buildings and we have needs.”

Among the attendees at last year’s “Start Your Own Business Seminar” held at the old City Hall was James Nyberg. And that resulted in Nyberg opening JM Mechanical for which he leased space near downtown for his new plumbing, heating and air conditioning business.

Lauer said another positive sign of a healthy business climate is the number of businesses that have re-

opened or remained open under new ownership. Those include J & B Meats, Eagle Cafe, The 34 (formerly the Galaxy), and Barnesville Drug and Hardware.

“These are very positive signs. But it also takes a lot of time and effort to make them happen. We’re actively involved in succession planning and encouraging business owners contemplating retirement to not just close up shop when they reach a certain age, which doesn’t help our business climate. We want to work with those owners and help them find buyers. It’s just one of the many things that are going on behind the scenes.”

Main Street Director Bailey Thompson keeps track of home-based businesses in Barnesville that may be outgrowing their space. The EDA’s assistance is available to those businesses needing additional space, possibly in the commercial park.

The EDA is looking at subdividing 1.5 acres in the commercial park into smaller lots where small businesses would be able to construct, for example, a 30’ x 40’ building.

“It’s a way for businesses to find space at an affordable price,” Lauer said. “It’s a concept that has become extremely popular. It’s working in FM area and it can work here. We hope to make further progress with that in 2018.”

Plans for city park enhancements will greatly complement and boost

EDA activity.

“The housing committee made sure we set aside land in the new housing addition for a future park,” Lauer said. “Getting playground equipment out there will make a huge difference in our marketing efforts.”

As this edition of Streetlight was being prepared, the “We Love Kids” campaign to create a new park in

Del Acres Gilbertson 2nd Addition and upgrade equipment in other city parks was moving full steam ahead. The city will match up to \$130,000 of the campaign funds raised.

Putting all those ingredients together makes for a positive outlook for business growth, new housing opportunities and new families who are looking for a better life in a healthy, progressive community.

Del Acres Gilbertson Second Addition has four new homes and will soon be the site of Barnesville’s newest park.







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