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City, LISC create 'Main Street Milwaukee'

Planning initiative would boost commercial areas with grants, assistance

Jen Haberkorn

Some of Milwaukee's urban commercial areas are getting a face-lift, thanks to assistance from the city of Milwaukee and Local Initiatives Support Corp.

Before the end of the year, the Commercial District Planning Initiative -- created by the city and Local Initiatives Support Corp. -- will take a proposal to the Milwaukee Common Council for formal endorsement of a "Main Street Milwaukee" program, which will be implemented in a number of commercial areas.

Based in New York City, Local Initiatives Support Corp., or LISC, is nonprofit organization that resurrects commercial property in low- to moderate-income areas. LISC has worked in Milwaukee through pre-existing community groups, usually in the form of providing financial support. LISC gathers community donations and grants and funnels the funding back to community groups for residents' use, said Leo Ries, LISC program director in Milwaukee.

If approved by the Common Council, the Commercial District Planning Initiative will move forward in selecting the commercial areas where the Main Street program will be used.

The program utilizes the concepts of bringing together commercial property owners on a street or neighborhood to develop a plan for growth. With grants and assistance from LISC, the groups will construct new signs and landscaping to beautify the area. They may also use grant money for marketing and promotion with the hope that they will expand existing business and attract new business to the area.

The program's first step is to get the locations to develop a formal plan to start the planning process.

A precursor to the Main Street program has been granting money to community development organizations to create new facades. About a year ago, the Layton Blvd. West Neighbors Inc. created a plan to redo the facades of storefronts on National Avenue between 31st and 38th streets, said Charlotte John-Gomez, the group's executive director. Layton Blvd. West Neighbors Inc. is a community development organization which focuses on the area between West Lincoln Avenue and West Pierce Street and South Layton Boulevard and South 39th Street.

The group believed improving the storefronts would help bring in new customers to existing businesses and attract new businesses to the neighborhood. So far, business owners are happy with the results.

Initially, store owners were reluctant to put money into the storefronts without first seeing artists' renderings to show them how the changes would look. But because most store owners could not afford to hire an architect on their own, LISC issued a \$7,000 grant to Layton Blvd. West Neighbors to create renderings.

So far, two businesses have received new facades and about seven more have shown interest in the project.

A new facade at Western Bilingual Employment Services L.L.C., 3111 W. National Ave., was finished this spring.

Owner Britney Xiong said the facade more accurately reflects the professional level of her business, which teaches work skills to people with little knowledge of English.

While her costs in the new facade reached \$20,000, she said she wouldn't have done it as quickly without the LISC grant.

"The grant motivated me to do something about the building," said Xiong, who declined to disclose the grant amount.

The changes to her storefront also improve the look of the neighborhood, she said. Xiong would have considered moving her business into a more aesthetically pleasing building had the grant not enabled her to improve the look of her existing location, she said,

LISC's grant is no more than \$5,000 per business and the owner is required to fund at least a matching amount, Ries said.

John-Gomez describes the facade program as a success.

"This program should be a model for commercial district revitalization," John-Gomez said. "This provides the vehicle (for business owners) to see what kind of improvements there could be."

Along the lines of the Main Street concept, LISC has also brought central management to strip malls.

Based on its finding that most successful strip malls have a company managing the entire unit, LISC worked with community organizations in the Lincoln Village neighborhood and Greenfield Avenue to find similar management companies, Ries said.

Ries considers the areas -- Greenfield Avenue between 68th and 76th streets in West Allis and Lincoln Village on Lincoln Avenue between Eighth and 16th streets -- to be successful today, almost two years after the management companies took over, based on the number of jobs brought to the areas.

The strip mall in Lincoln Village has had a net gain of seven businesses and 29 full-time jobs, Ries said.

LISC also helps small businesses with their strategic planning. In the case of the Layton Boulevard businesses, LISC began helping businesses secure consultants for marketing and window displays. The project began about a year ago and owners welcome the help, John-Gomez said.

Michal Dawson, deputy commissioner of the Milwaukee Department of City Development, said LISC and the city have a common goal to revitalize commercial and neighborhood property.

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