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Beyond Restoration: Heritage Development in Rural Communities

Rural communities rarely have the money to maintain much less restore their significant historic buildings. I saw a sign once that said “maintenance is preservation”. Certainly, if our property owners would simply maintain rather than neglect their buildings, our community’s storefront – its public face - would be so much more attractive. Anyway, if we manage to restore a structure; the likelihood that our interpretive exhibits will change once in place is pretty small. It is the simple truth that small communities have limited human resources, whether paid or volunteer, that are qualified to bring these attractions to life.

Having the good fortune to be awarded a few grants to restore buildings and pay for professional and academic experts, we have made some remarkable progress for a county of 16,000 people. A few volunteer community preservation enthusiasts have restored a Carnegie Library in Franklin, installed new auditorium wood floor in a Rosenwald School in Calvert, moved a railroad depot to avoid destruction and fully restored it in Hearne and restored an American Woman’s League chapter house in Calvert. Hearne has also been a recipient of a HUD economic development grant to rebuild an Army barrack at Camp Hearne, a WWII prisoner-of-war site, to house its archeological survey and memorabilia exhibit. The problem these volunteers and organizations face now is how do we maintain our buildings and share our stories.

Hotel occupancy and 4B economic development taxes raise revenues to help preserve historic structures and hire staff in cities and counties of significant population. In our small

rural communities with a few B&Bs and a convenience store, these revenues are hardly sufficient.

There really is money for “brick and mortar” restoration. The NEH and NPS offer wonderful grants for hiring specialists to aid in planning and implementing interpretive projects. What we cannot find are grants to hire the museum and tourism studies graduates coming out of our universities. Volunteers have good intentions, but are not always capable or able to be full time program managers. If we really want to sustain our destinations and make them the economic treasures we claim them to be, we must be creative to entice repeated visits as well as attract new sightseers. A community might have the most unique story to tell in Texas, but without help from professionals, no one knows it exists.

What rural communities need are three year subsidy grants for qualified professionals to be our interpreters, marketers, event planners, and program directors to help restore our historic sites and plan events around them. A three year contract is long enough to offer job security and attract qualified applicants. Part of the coordinators job duties would be to secure future funding for the project and his staffing needs. Three years is usually enough to implement a program plan that will hopefully promise sustainability of the project. I think my mantra will be “*timely maintenance is preservation – paid professional staff is sustainability*”.