

Plan to spruce up Franklin's appearance a work in progress

By SUSAN DOUCET / Monitor staff



Todd Workman works at a table in Toad Hall one afternoon. Photo by Susan Doucet.

Close to 20,000 vehicles pass through downtown Franklin daily, but very few ever stop.

Historically, downtown Franklin has had little to entice people to pull over and stay awhile. Nearly a quarter of the storefronts along the half-mile stretch marked by two bridges are vacant. A Thai cuisine restaurant stands next to the city's historic opera house and city hall, but few other eateries are in the area. The marquee of an old cinema remains, but the building is no longer a theater.

A decade ago, officials and residents spoke to the Monitor about updating downtown Franklin's appearance, described as a rundown mill town.

Franklin, known as the "Three Rivers City," is still trying to kick that image. The city, one of two in Merrimack County, has entered a new transition period, with fresh private development, public discussions to craft a modern vision for the city and some federal funds to back it up.

Give city officials, business owners and involved individuals a few years, and Franklin, they hope, will have a new image.

"I think we are making progress, I really do," said City Manager Elizabeth Dragon. "It's a long-term project. Nothing happens overnight."

Identity, image

For seven years, Dragon has been city manager. When she arrived in Franklin, an effort to improve the city's image and invigorate downtown was under way. It was dubbed a renaissance, she said.

Now, a new effort, one that appears to have momentum, is under way.

"I've always known that Franklin could be a great little city," said Ron Magoon, Franklin Savings Bank executive vice president and chief operating officer. "For as much as we have struggled over the years with our identity and our image, we have an opportunity to redefine who we are and what we are."

A few years ago, Todd Workman, a Gilford resident with a vision focused around permaculture, came to Franklin, seeing potential in the city. Bringing new life to this city is currently his full-time job. He envisions a sustainable city with businesses to attract people downtown, such as a microbrewery, restaurants and co-working spaces.

Workman and his recently founded nonprofit, PermaCityLife, as well as other individuals and organizations, are working on seven properties downtown this year, moving these projects, and others, forward.

Franklin Savings Bank, itself a Central Street presence, is working on funding these projects with a total of \$2 million to \$2.5 million in loans.

"Our interest is seeing Franklin really reach the potential that it has (as) a small city in New Hampshire," Magoon said. "If we can achieve this vision that we're all kind of rallying behind . . . obviously the bank stands to benefit from that."

A group of community stakeholders, including members of the nonprofit, city officials and local businesspeople, has been meeting with the community bank over the last few months.

A few of the projects the bank will be funding include Buell's Block, two houses near Memorial Street and the brick storefront a few doors down from Toad Hall.

"If you came by in the fall and you saw seven buildings with facade improvements going on simultaneously in town, plus you have the insurance company that's already been done, plus you know this CATCH Housing thing's happening, I think that's a pretty good sign, almost a certainty, that it's happening this time around," Workman said.

CATCH Housing announced this spring its plans to repurpose an old mill into affordable apartments.

Emerging results

The city, like Workman, wants to see progress, and is taking steps steadily – but perhaps slowly – to achieve results. In April, a three-day community workshop was held

to address what Franklin can do to accommodate itself for an aging population and to revitalize the downtown. Similar discussions have been held in the past with few concrete results.

This time, results are emerging from the conference. The city received a grant to fund a one-year downtown business coordinator position who can help continue the revitalization efforts.

“There’s just so much to do,” Dragon said. The position, which will largely be focused on grants, has not been filled yet. “We need to get some grants to make some of these downtown projects work, and there are some hurdles to that and it’s going to take a year to do it.”

The projects creating buzz and excitement are the ones that are accessible to guests: Toad Hall; The Franklin Studio, a recently opened coffee shop; a proposed microbrewery; new housing spaces. But making these projects feasible requires less splashy progress, like parking.

In order to create residential spaces at 321 and 325 Central St. – two of the properties included in the group to potentially be funded by the bank – overnight parking spaces are needed. In order to access a nearby municipal lot, a change to the city’s parking ordinance is required.

When Workman approached the city council with concepts and ideas last year, he said he found opposition from the nine-member board. This time, returning as PermaCityLife, the city council was unanimously in support of the proposal, a sign of an improved relationship between Workman and city officials. The council granted approval in August.

Getting rolling

Building momentum, piece by piece, is similar to bowling, explained Colby-Sawyer College business professor Bill Spear. Downtown Franklin is equivalent to a bowling alley and projects in the city are pins.

“For Franklin, let’s say Toad Hall is one of the pins,” Spear said of the recently opened mixed-use space. “That’s one pin knocked over.”

Still standing are other projects, say acquiring the financing for the numerous buildings and projects downtown.

“Each one of these is a bowling pin,” he said. “As you start to knock over more and more of these, people start to notice that’s something happening in Franklin.”

The analogy is not one that Spear developed. His comparison of Franklin to a bowling alley comes from Geoffrey Moore’s book *Inside the Tornado: Strategies for Developing*,

Leveraging, and Surviving Hypergrowth Markets. The book is one the business professor, who has been lending his expertise to Franklin, uses in his college courses.

“Todd and Franklin have knocked over a couple of those bowling pins,” he said.

Spear is part of an organization that is getting involved to help the city. Colby-Sawyer College has invested time and resources in Franklin, with students of various majors spending time studying the city, professors and college leadership sharing experience, and plans for the college to incorporate its studies into downtown Franklin.

In August, the college was approved for a grant to implement its educational plans in Franklin, a step that benefits both the school and the city. The college, like Workman, is supportive of permaculture, the center of his vision for the city.

The city, though, is still hesitant about the importance of permaculture in Franklin’s future.

“I like that he’s been so interested in permaculture because it’s gotten a different group of people looking at Franklin, interested in Franklin, but I don’t think that’s necessarily our identity,” Dragon said. In her eyes, the city’s identity is more tied to its natural resources.

But for Workman, it’s all about the vision, which can still be a sticking point between him and the city.

“Then I have no real driving force to come here every day,” without the permaculture vision. “If I’m reduced from a vision and a movement that makes sense to me . . . if you take that away, then I’m just here working for free to revitalize bricks and mortar in Franklin. Why would I do that?”

Toad Hall is currently Workman’s headquarters. He works there, holds meetings there and sleeps there.

Workman and Toad Hall have been the bowler and bowling ball, but now others are joining the game. With the bank’s investment, involvement from groups and individuals, and a seemingly improved relationship with the city, the revitalization is rolling along.

“To me, that’s how you overcome a stigma,” Workman said. “You get people excited about what’s happening in town and show them some of the project components that are actually in the works, that are happening today. They’re not pie in the sky dreams. They’re in process, they’re going on. And you show some of the aspirational goals. And people see a city different.”

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