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Plan suggests 4 regions of Petersburg be targets of revitalization

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PETERSBURG — The Local Initiatives Support Corp. topped off three days of community planning meetings Thursday with a presentation of the initial plan for several communities in the city.

In a session called “Hands On — Hands Up,” more than 100 people filled the Tabernacle Baptist Church Education Center to view the initial designs presented by architectural firm Urban Design Associates and give their own recommendations.

“This is really about you all and this work will be done by you all,” said Veronica Jemmott, a community development manager with Virginia LISC. “This is about what you want to see happen.”

The plan, presented by Rob Robinson of UDA, was the result of suggestions and data collected by LISC last year.

UDA winnowed the information to focus on four regions of the city: the area around the old fairgrounds, Battersea, the area around the Halifax Triangle and Blandford.

“You can’t just let things run their course,” Robinson said. He said that, in revitalizing the city, all involved would have to keep the characters of the targeted neighborhoods in mind.

“Before you know it, you can completely lose an identity.”

The plans for the neighborhoods focused around targeting and eliminating vacant properties to stimulate further growth.

In some cases, it would require extensive work, such as in Battersea, Robinson said.

“It’s almost as much vacant as it is built,” he said.

Another problem his team spotted in the city is a large amount of absentee landlords who let their properties slowly decay.

Once major areas of concern are tackled, he said, getting areas restored would not be hard. He cited the example of Ross Court, which branches off Harding Street.

With road improvements and house restorations, the design team envisioned a vibrant community.

“You don’t have to take down anything,” he said.

Other suggestions included reevaluating the purpose of Washington and Wythe streets and focusing efforts into an extensive restoration of the Blandford neighborhood.

Jemmott said that changing the city will have to go beyond structural changes. LISC’s goals include focusing on education, healthy lifestyles, expanding business opportunities and improving access to jobs.

“We’ve got a lot more to do,” she said.

During the breakout session for residents to discuss UDA’s proposals, citizen response was positive.

Wayne Crocker, director of the Petersburg Public Library System, saw the proposed plans as a step in the right direction for

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the city.

"I think the ideas and the visions are fantastic," he said. What really fascinated him about the plans were the ideas of how to restore the neighborhoods.

"I would like to see the plans become a reality," Crocker said.

Petersburg resident Theresa Gee was also hopeful for the implementation of the final plan.

"We are extremely excited about what we are seeing and what we are hearing," she said. She felt that the plans proposed could lead to the city being on par with other historic southern cities, such as Charleston, S.C., and Savannah, Ga.

"We have to opportunity to have that look here," she said.

Crocker also was in favor of the plans that were presented and agreed with Jemmott that it will take an effort of the entire community to make the plan a reality.

"We truly have a wealth of potential," he said. "We're going to have to all work together."

LISC will hold another meeting about the plan in April. The plan should be in its final form by June.

The Cameron Foundation is funding the work of LISC in the city.

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