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Kaine-do attitude for the city

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PETERSBURG — Gov. Timothy M. Kaine shared some of his experiences as mayor of a large, fiscally stressed city going through a period of redevelopment with area leaders over breakfast at Tabernacle Baptist Church on Halifax Street yesterday morning.

“Petersburg is a beautiful place,” Kaine said at the event. “I have loved this city since my days on Richmond City Council.”

The breakfast was sponsored by Virginia Local Initiatives Support Corp. which since 2006 has been working with citizens and officials on designing comprehensive plans that will enhance rebuilding efforts throughout the city.

Virginia LISC acts as a bridge between interested residents, corporations, foundations, government and developers interested in increasing the supply of high quality affordable housing in a given area. Virginia LISC then leverages available dollars into single family, multi-family, community and commercial developments with far greater reach and impact than would be possible through individual effort.

Kaine said that one of the things he most likes about Petersburg is its unique architecture.

“You could probably blindfold someone and drop them onto the street corner of any city in America, Tampa, Dallas, Seattle and that person may not know where they’re at,” Kaine said. “But Petersburg has a distinction and a beauty in its properties.”

Kaine also shared how in 1998 while on the Richmond City Council that group of nine councilmen came to an agreement on how to best utilize resources on that city’s revitalization.

“It was a tough decision but we decided to concentrate on just five properties per year, which was even harder because there were nine representatives on City Council,” Kaine said. “But we realized before that we were spreading our resources too thin and we weren’t really creating any dramatic improvements.”

Kaine said that with the revised approach the city experienced accelerated developments in the areas desired.

The governor said that same strategy could be put to use in Petersburg with a concentration on specific neighborhoods.

Rob Robinson with Urban Design Associates, who spoke earlier at the breakfast, advocated the same approach and named four specific areas in conjunction with Virginia LISC that his group had developed plans for.

Robinson said those neighborhoods include Blandford, the Halifax area, Battersea and the Rome Street/Westview/Birdville area.

“The goal is to transform some of these areas that were identified as the worst places to the best places,” Robinson said as he displayed artists’ conceptual images of what development in those neighborhoods could look like.

The images showed revitalized neighborhoods filled with trees and a blend of old and new buildings.

Robinson said in areas where rebuilding is necessary that it should be done in a classic Petersburg style to closely reflect the other buildings in the neighborhood.

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"We want to stitch these new buildings in. It has to be very deliberate so that we can build back a sense of place," Robinson said. "We want to take away a cancer and replace it with something healthy and to have it thrive."

Robinson said in the case of the Halifax neighborhood, local history and concerns prevailed over initial desires.

"When we first looked at Ross Court, our initial thoughts were to bulldoze it," Robinson said. However, after learning of the area's history and how many of the homes were designed by one of the first African-American architects, he said the opinion of Urban Design Associates had changed to one of renovating the homes.

Robinson said the recommendation was changed after considering how connected to the community the neighborhood is.

All four of the neighborhoods Robinson said should be concentrated on first serve as gateways to the city. He said this was on purpose so it can add a sense of excitement to not just the city but the region.

To help get the projects started Kaine said he would work to determine what he could do as governor when he drafts the next biennial budget.

"I have a very unique experience as governor having first served as a mayor," Kaine said. He added that the last time that happened was with John Garland Pollard who served as governor from 1930 to 1934; prior to serving as governor he was mayor of Williamsburg.

"I want to do a lot for the First Cities of Virginia," Kaine said. "The cities like Richmond and Petersburg."

Kaine referenced the Virginia First Cities Coalition which is an organization of 15 member cities that are some of the oldest and most fiscally stressed in the state. Member cities include Petersburg, Richmond and Hopewell.

Kaine said that he would help to investigate what tools the city could use to help achieve the development goals of LISC.

Petersburg City Manager B. David Canada thanked Kaine for coming to the breakfast and added that he thinks the plan is a great plan.

"This all started five years ago when we first approached LISC about coming to work with the city," Canada said.

Canada mentioned how there has been a great deal of investment in the city in the intervening years. Some of the investors Canada specifically named included Boehringer Ingelheim Chemical which has invested more than \$225 million, Southside Regional Medical Center which has invested more than \$125 million in their new facility off of Crater Road. Additionally, Canada said that John Tyler Community College would soon be investing in the city.

Petersburg Mayor Annie Mickens, who was also at the breakfast, also expressed her gratitude and said that the plans represent magnificent days ahead for the city.

"We will be the jewel of Southside Virginia," Mickens said. "Many said it couldn't be done, and it's been wonderful to prove them wrong."

Mickens said that many people had doubted the planning process of LISC would work, yet more than 1,000 residents had already participated so far in the various planning stages and from a diverse set of backgrounds.

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