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Governor comes to Petersburg with praise and a proposal

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Gov. Timothy M. Kaine came to Petersburg to give the city some love, but more importantly, he came with some solid ideas on how to revitalize the city beyond Old Towne.

Kaine, speaking at a breakfast sponsored by Virginia Local Initiatives Support Corp., praised Petersburg for its strong architectural history. "Petersburg is a beautiful place," Kaine said at the event. "I have loved this city since my days on Richmond City Council."

Kaine added: "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."

But Kaine came to Petersburg with more than just praise. He said Petersburg should consider following Richmond's example of revitalization by focusing on a handful of areas.

Kaine, the former mayor of Richmond, said that city's council in 1998 decided to concentrate on five properties per year. The strategy worked in Richmond and could work in Petersburg, Kaine said.

Rob Robinson with Urban Design Associates, also advocated a similar approach for Petersburg. His firm, working with Virginia LISC, has identified four specific areas to revitalize and have developed plans for those areas. The 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. And artists' conceptual images development in those neighborhoods 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.

"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."

All four of the neighborhoods Robinson said should be concentrated on first serve as gateways to the city. This makes sense since first impressions can be lasting and the improvements in Old Towne may not carry as much punch if you have to first travel through a blighted area.

The presentation highlights the work LISC has done since last year to get the input of citizens and officials to develop comprehensive plans for 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.

But the progress detailed last week leaves one big question: What can the state contribute to Petersburg's efforts? The governor said he would work to determine what the state could do to help get the projects started with when he drafts the next biennial budget.

It is up to city officials and the area's General Assembly delegation to keep lobbying Kaine for state assistance in Petersburg's revitalization effort.

Nonetheless, the presentation by LISC and endorsed by the governor is another solid step on the long road to revitalizing Petersburg. And the strategy of focusing on specific areas - and not just Old Towne - is a very positive development. Revitalization efforts must be in all parts of the city so that all Petersburg citizens realize they have a stake in the upcoming efforts.

Petersburg Mayor Annie Mickens said that the plans represent magnificent days ahead for the city.

"We will be the jewel of Southside Virginia," Mickens said.

We hope she's right.

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