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Community leaders add input to plan

By Christine Haines, Herald-Standard
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BROWNSVILLE - Educators, social service providers, clergy and other community leaders Wednesday had an opportunity to provide input into a joint comprehensive plan for Brownsville and Brownsville Township.

During breakout sessions during a focus group meeting, the community leaders identified the top three problems in Brownsville: a need for economic development, a need to change negative perceptions of the community internally and externally and a need to deal with the issue of having one person, Ernest Liggett, own most of the vacant downtown business district.

"Economic development is one of the main problems. We need to bring small businesses into town," said Brownsville Township Supervisor Homer Yeardie.

A suggestion was made to offer incentives to small-business owners to locate in the borough and township.

"One of the problems we have is the lack of a tax base. With a lack of finances, we can't hire a full-time code enforcement officer, which leads to other problems," said Brownsville Mayor Norma Ryan.

Joy Frye-Thompson of Cross Keys Human Services said the local officials need to be more supportive of prospective business owners, helping them to get their businesses going. She noted that she did not get that support when she wanted to open a personal care home in the borough.

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Patricia Redigan, the wife of borough Councilman Martin Redigan, said a change in how people view recovery for the community may also be in order.

"People have said we can't do anything until we bring in a huge plant with 500 jobs. Why can't we just be a nice place to live? That's what people do all over America, live one place and work in another," Redigan said.

"We need to change the perception of the outside world. This is a nice place to live," said business owner Ike Polacek.

"If you ride through Brownsville right now, the borough and the township, there are a lot of homes for sale and the people can't sell them because of the perception of the area," Yeardie said.

Part of changing people's perceptions about Brownsville would be finding ways to improve the appearance of the town, according to one person in attendance at the meeting.

"I love my job, but I am severely depressed for five minutes a day when I get off the Lane-Bane Bridge because of the town. When you see the town, you think the school district must be deplorable, too," said Lawrence Golembiewski, the superintendent for Browns-ville Area School District.

Golembiewski said he wants the district to play a larger role in the community's future.

"Brownsville has the highest incidence of diabetes in the nation, per capita," Golembiewski said. "We are going to open the walking track and the gym to the public."

"Until we take back the town, I think it's all useless," said Brownsville resident Robert Hess, who was representing Interfaith Caregivers.

"I agree with Mr. Hess. Even if we cannot change it, take a stand," said Sister James Ann Germuska, executive director of Cross Keys Human Services Inc.

Golembiewski suggested that another approach would be to work with the owner of the downtown buildings.

"If he's not going to give them up, the best thing to do is to invite him in and work with him," Golembiewski said.

Dennis Martinak of Mackin Engineering, which is preparing the comprehensive plan for the two communities, said options in dealing with the single ownership issue would be to establish a real estate trust and to increase code enforcement activities.

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