

# What kind of city do we want St. Marys to be?

I have been talking about “master planning” and its necessity for quite a while and we are now finally moving forward with master planning in a thoughtful, professional manner.

The council is fully on board. Our staffing component is now complete, and our citizens are acknowledging that they are eager to be engaged and involved. The timing is right.

We made a conscious decision to begin the process with one neighborhood in a short six-month project and then move on to a more complicated and longer-term visioning and master plan for the entire city.

We have selected a steering committee of diverse and talented citizens who will be working with our professional consultants and staff to craft a plan for “downtown St. Marys Main Street” that will be designed to bring vibrancy to that



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Guest columnist

neighborhood. It will not just be ideas or fancy drawings. It will be a plan with action steps and a timetable.

We have contracted with consultants from the University of Georgia’s Carl Vinson Institute of Government that have experience successfully developing plans for dozens of other Georgia cities, each of which is a certified Main Street city as is St. Marys. It is import-

ant to note these consultants will not simply come to town and put a cookie cutter plan on the table. We, the citizens, will actually design it. Their job is to ask questions, listen, compile citizen response, review previous documents and present conclusions and observations to the steering committee for review and action.

Many people have great ideas, but not all great ideas are easily executed or financially feasible. The committee will have to sort through the great ideas and find good ones that are viable and affordable as a starting point. That should not, however, limit our visioning for the future. To use a baseball analogy, games are won not just with home runs but lots of singles and doubles.

One thing I want to make clear is that this first step is just that. The main street plan will be folded into the larger St. Marys master

planning process that will commence late this fall or in early 2016.

Main street is an important part of our city, but it is just one part. Our long range goal is to create a master plan for the entire city over the next 18 to 24 months.

The economy is coming back. There are encouraging signs of growth up and down the coast. Spaceport Camden is taking the next step toward its creation. Purchase of the old mill site is closer to reality. St. Marys needs to be ready to capitalize on the potential new growth of businesses and residents. But it is critical that we do so in a planned manner. In the past, our change has been haphazard and lacking cohesive focus. And none of us are satisfied with that approach.

We need to answer the question: “What kind of city do we want St. Marys to be?”

There is a misperception that the only people who can participate in the main street visioning project are those who live downtown or have businesses downtown. Not true. We want everyone who lives anywhere in St. Marys to jump in and offer comment and opinion. If main street is to thrive, it requires residents from throughout the city to consider it their “main street.” Downtown is not just about attracting tourists, but being the kind of place that all St. Marys citizens can enjoy.

As I mentioned above, interviews and focus groups are underway and more will be scheduled over the next few weeks and months. There will be surveys and telephone interviews. We will be seeking comments and ideas from as many people as possible from every corner of the city.

We want your input. Think of the small down-

town area and what it could be. What kind of businesses do we need? What kind of housing? How much design is harmonious? What about green space and walking/biking paths? How do we take advantage of our riverfront location? We are no longer a mill town. We are still a proud Navy town. We think we can be more. What should our focus be?

I know you all have ideas and opinions. Your opinion may not prevail in the end, but without your voice, the process will not be successful. If you are not contacted to express a view, email me and I will make sure your voice is heard.

This project is an exciting first step in creating the kind of city we all want to continue calling home. Forward your comments to john.morrissey@stmarysga.gov

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