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Newport CityCommunity Gathering Leaves Residents Wanting More

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Staff Writer

NEWPORT CITY -- A last burst of snow flurries Wednesday evening didn't deter about three dozen people from gathering in the Gateway Center to talk about their city.

They met to talk about the changes planned for the city, given the plans by developer Bill Stenger and his Northeast Kingdom Economic Development Initiative to develop parts of downtown Newport City and bring needed jobs.

But they ended up doing more than that. They laughed at each other's memories and stories about living and working in Newport City.

And many promised to return on the third Wednesday in April for the second gathering, this time bringing a friend and a potluck dish to share.

The intent of the gathering, hosted by the Newport City Community Justice Center and Newport City Renaissance Corp., was to help community members share and spread news about what is happening in the city and also to help connect people with resources they might need to solve problems or to help improve the city.

For instance, Rhonda Patenaude, owner of Brenda's restaurant on Main Street, said she knows that some seniors served by Meals on Wheels are having a hard time. City manager John Ward Jr. told everyone that the city manages the Niles Fund that can be used to assist individual residents who have financial difficulties.

Another person asked whether the city could install batting cages somewhere. She was urged to talk to city recreation director Andy Cappella, or join the city recreation committee.



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PHOTO BY ROBIN SMITH

Two dozen people shared fond memories and hopes for the future during a first community meeting at the Gateway in Newport City Wednesday evening.

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Jennifer Bernier, who lives on Summer Street, told how the community garden there has benefited the entire neighborhood. Now, neighbors conduct an informal neighborhood watch program and help their elderly neighbors with odd jobs or shoveling, she said. The benefits have spread beyond Summer Street. Others said they want the same kind of project in their neighborhoods.

The group talked about the status of Stenger's projects, with city officials saying that none of the projects are in the permit process yet.

Neil Morrisette said he has lived and worked in Newport City for 54 years, and expects to see big things soon.

His biggest concern was that the changes will arrive and locals won't be ready.

Several people suggested that those seeking jobs in construction should take the occupational safety course being offered at North Country Career Center for \$25. That was news to several people, who hoped to take advantage of the good price for the course.

Several present said they would tell their friends to contact the Department of Labor in Newport City for information about the jobs that are coming and what training will be needed.

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Patenaude said she didn't want to see the developments take away the community feeling she enjoys. Her favorite part of Newport City is to get an ice cream cone at Pick & Shovel and enjoy it while on the boardwalk.

"I think it's just going to rejuvenate the community," Mayor Paul Monette said.

More people will help the city, he said. The city has lost 500 people in the last 10 years, even more over the past 50 years, he said.

Ward said that he believes if the jobs come, some of the city's problems will go away. "When money flows into the area, people will have money in their pockets and it's going to be great."

The group agreed that they need to invite more young people, including from the high school, to the next meeting.

Moderator Amy Shollenberger of Action Circles in Montpelier kept the gathering light-hearted. By the time the two-hour gathering was over, even people who had argued over the future of the city at city council meetings were sharing some laughs and saying they would come again.

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