



Carbon County [PA] REALTORS® Help Bring Tiny Borough of Lehighton Back to Life – April 2014

"They say 'REALTORS® don't read,'" laughs Kathy Henderson, former Association Executive of the 82-member Carbon County Association of REALTORS®, based in the borough of Lehighton in the foothills of the Pennsylvania Poconos. "But I'm very glad I did!" What she had read was an article in her Spring 2013 *Association Executive Magazine*, outlining the REALTOR® Party grant programs and explaining the resources available.

Henderson knew that Lehighton needed help, and she wondered about the Smart Growth Action Grants. The three-stoplight town had suffered the loss of its traditional industries - garment mills and the railroad - decades ago, and its four-block business district was in a bad state of decline. "Why not?" she asked herself. "All they could say was no, and no one was going to die in the process." So she picked up the phone and called the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® to talk it over.

She discussed the idea with Hugh Morris, who administers NAR's Smart Growth program. Hugh listened to her describe the situation and what she wanted to accomplish, and advised her to request a \$15,000 grant. That amount would fully fund a revitalization survey by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Center, and that was what Lehighton needed. Morris helped Henderson with the application, which was reviewed and jointly submitted by the state association. When the grant was awarded, she says, "Our REALTOR® members were simply shocked. They were so proud to have secured this aid for the borough, and said things like "Wow! NAR knows we're here!"

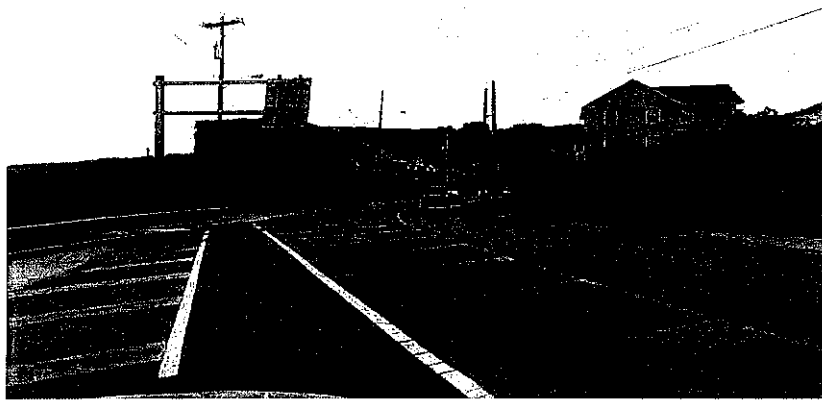
Two appointed consultants from Main Street Center told Henderson and borough manager Nicole Beckett exactly what data they needed in advance of their three-day visit in August. When they arrived, they hit the ground running -- and Lehighton was ready. The most intense day began with a breakfast focus group of about 20 core stakeholders, to determine what the locals wanted for their town, and how they wanted to go about achieving it. This was followed by a two-and-a-half hour walking tour; lunch with local government officials; and five additional in-depth focus group meetings. About 80 local residents and businesspeople participated, reports Henderson, who adds that all seemed to be especially heartened to be involved in lifting the borough's prospects. "The program was conducted so professionally, by unbiased outside experts asking pertinent questions, and our answers were listened to," she says. The fact that it was the work of Main Street Center, which had set the nearby town of Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania, back on its feet within living memory, lent significant credence to all the proceedings."

In October, Main Street Center submitted a full assessment report, detailing its findings and making specific recommendations for revitalizing the borough's business district. These range from cost effective beginnings, like landscaping a "gateway" at one end of the main street, to more extensive projects like developing the riverfront, to attract whitewater rafting traffic that comes downstream from Jim Thorpe. Everyone is in favor of moving forward with the report's recommendations, says Henderson, and it's now just a question of resources.



Lehighton will be celebrating its 150th anniversary two years from now, and has its local association of REALTORS® and NAR to thank for setting it on the path forward to a bright and prosperous milestone, and beyond. "It's been such a good program, and we're very grateful for NAR's help," says Henderson. Though she is no longer with the REALTORS®, as the new Director of Economic Development for Carbon County, she will be taking the Main Street program to the next level in Lehighton, and is excited to see what happens next.

To learn more about how the REALTORS® of Carbon County, Pennsylvania used an NAR Smart Growth Action Grant to engage Main Street Center to help revitalize Lehighton, contact Kathy Henderson at khenderson@carboncountychamber.org.



This southern-most section of Lehighton's downtown will be developed into a more welcoming gateway to Lehighton.



First Street as it currently appears. While property owners had attempted to improve their facades, they need more help to push it over the top.



This undeveloped river front area currently is utilized by whitewater rafting and kayaking companies further north of Lehigh. This calm portion of the river is where rafters and kayakers would be able to leave the water and take a break and use picnic tables and port-a-johns.