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Scranton Tomorrow organization is busy in the downtown



BY JIM LOCKWOOD, STAFF WRITER / PUBLISHED: FEBRUARY 13, 2019

SCRANTON — The nonprofit Scranton Tomorrow organization hopes to have a new pocket park in downtown open by the end of the year.

The project to convert a vacant lot on Wyoming Avenue at Linden Street was one of the larger initiatives undertaken by Scranton Tomorrow in 2018, the first year of a three-year plan with the group leading downtown economic development.

Scranton Tomorrow also placed 64 self-watering planters downtown and sees many other opportunities ahead to improve the city, organization Executive Director Leslie Collins and Second Vice President Tim Maloney told city council in a recent update.

"We feel pretty confident that we're moving ahead. We're moving in the right direction," Collins told council during its informal caucus on Feb. 4.

Mayor Bill Courtright and city council last year put Scranton Tomorrow, which was established in 1992, in charge of an

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Scranton City Council in its informal caucus on Feb. 4, when council heard an update from Scranton Tomorrow Executive Director Leslie Collins on that organization's activities. JIM LOCKWOOD/STAFF PHOTO

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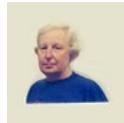
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economic development plan for 2018-20 that aims to lay the foundation for creation of a downtown business improvement district by 2021.

The initiative represents a shift in how the city pursues economic development downtown. The city's Office of Economic and Community Development used to solely handle such matters, but OECD primarily administers federal block grant funding constrained to low- to moderate-income areas.

Scranton Tomorrow's initiatives generally fall into three areas: "safe, clean and green," promotions and economic revitalization, Collins said.

The nonprofit received a \$400,000 state grant toward converting a vacant, contaminated lot at 248-256 Wyoming Ave. into a pocket park. The city purchased the site, a former commercial dry-cleaning operation, to resolve a lawsuit by the former property owner against the city. As a partner in the park project, Scranton Tomorrow leads stewardship efforts. "We're hoping that the park will be able to be complete by the end of 2019," Collins said.

Some of the organization's other actions included:

- Added a staffer, Liz Baldi, as project coordinator/administrative assistant to work closely with small businesses on promotions.
- Contracted with writer/media consultant Julie Imel for marketing and promotions, and to help explain to property owners and small businesses the purpose of a business improvement district and their roles in one.
- Searched for spots to move Scranton Tomorrow's office from The Tripp House, 1011 N. Main Ave., back to the downtown. The office left downtown several years ago. "We're open to suggestions and we're still looking to build that partnership to get us back downtown," Collins said.
- Discussed with the outside operators of the city's parking system, National Development Council and ABM Parking, possibly contracting with them for certain "curb appeal" matters not handled by the city DPW, such as keeping sidewalks clean and shoveled, and removing graffiti and litter.
- Reviewed adding more snowflake decorations on utility poles for greater visual impact on travelers entering downtown.
- Assisted on a downtown residential parking survey conducted by NDC/ABM.
- Hosted a free lecture in December titled "Towards a More Walkable Scranton" by urban design expert Jeff Speck. "We're hoping to move that to the next level" of conducting a walkability study, Collins said.



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- Worked on making design guidelines on matters such as lighting, benches, sidewalks, facades, signs and surface lots more user-friendly, "so that everyone is following uniform guidelines and not leaving it up to themselves," Collins said. In this vein, Councilman Wayne Evans said the city also needs to create design guidelines for sidewalk cafes.

- Undertook numerous holiday events and promotions, including restaurant week, a 'lunch local' campaign, an Instagram holiday takeover, scavenger hunt and window decorating showcase. The organization looks to carry over some promotions into spring and/or summer.

Looking ahead, Maloney said the downtown's designation last year as a federal opportunity zone for capital gains tax incentives could drive significant investment and economic growth. Scranton ranked among 8,700 federal opportunity zones in the nation created last year, though regulations are not complete.

"We're working with trying to come up with different plans and proposals to bring outside investment dollars to the area, to the opportunity zone. There's a huge appetite for it," Maloney said. "We are staying on top of that."

Council President Pat Rogan also said the opportunity zone, coupled with a citywide 10-year LERTA tax abatement program on residential and commercial improvements adopted by the city in December, could be "huge to bring in investor dollars" to the downtown.

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