

Letter to the Editor

Editor:

As I prepare to leave for the summer, I continue to focus on the future of DeFuniak and leave you with some parting thoughts. The first is that we have a crisis at city hall and I am not sure when/if this will be resolved. We continue to turn over key personnel at an alarming rate. This gives us a blighted reputation among prospective investors and further constrains our growth opportunities.

I believe we need to take action from the bottom up through citizen networking to develop low cost and creative projects. There is a possibility that DeFuniak could receive Main Street designation in the future, but even so that is 1-2 years away before the program would even start and much longer for it to become an effective and functioning reality.

In the meantime, we have the frustrated and frustrating process of public participation to manage. Our community is ready for change and I believe there are some ways we can make a difference without involvement of local government.

According to the mayor of a major city, "the lack of resources is no longer an excuse not to act. The idea that action should only be taken after all of the answers and the resources have been found is a sure recipe for paralysis. It is supremely arrogant to believe that planning can be done only after every variable has been controlled." We are currently in a state of paralysis, in my opinion.

There is an idea in urban planning today called "Guerilla way finding." This is when local people can't wait for politics to catch up before they improve their city. They then begin to take small scale actions to serve a larger purpose. An excellent example of this is the Art Night created by downtown merchants and artists. I applaud their creativity.

We need to find additional ways to demonstrate a different future for our downtown, which will in turn improve our entire town. That is something all of us desire. Let's talk about strategy versus tactics. A French urbanist argues that strategies are the formal tool of the powerful (government) and tactics serve as the response of the weak (citizens). Perhaps if we citizens develop successful tactics then government can respond with appropriate strategies. But in order to accomplish that we will need an enlightened and progressive local government willing to work for and with us.

As a part of guerilla way finding, I think there are some zero dollars and also almost zero planning time ideas we can use to demonstrate a different vision. As an example, we would all like to see a vibrant and walkable downtown. Why not build on the Art Night success and create something like Free Fridays or Social Saturdays where we block off Baldwin Avenue and divide it into three segments. One segment could be for kids where they are allowed to skate within measured lanes marked with traffic tape. Kids would then have something specific to do and in a safe environment. How about another segment for street dancing. We have lots of local musicians who I am sure would love to perform and get their name out there. Part of the music could be for the youth and some of it for senior citizens who remember when people actually danced in each other's arms. That alone would probably bring visitors from surrounding communities. Another benefit would be intergenerational communication which is critical to any community. We would easily provide that missing social element.

Another segment of the street could just simply be filled with chairs. People would be invited to bring their own foldable lawn chairs and tables, picnics if they desired, card games, checkers, etc. In time we could have a pop-up boutiques, a food truck, maybe even a big screen TV or even a live remote radio broadcast in which citizens were asked for their views on issues.

Informal, inter-racial community gatherings are a great way for people to feel involved in their city and anxious to know more and even participate in problem solving. As it is, we currently have no gathering place for kids or adults to simply get to know each other and exchange ideas in a casual, but free and safe environment. We need to get them out of their houses and TVs and into community life and activities.

There is something else used today in many communities called "Chair bombing." That is where chairs and benches are placed in areas where they currently do not yet exist. This is often accomplished by using shipping pallets to make chairs, benches, tables, planters, low rise walls, stages, etc. The pallets should be stamped HT (heat treated - good) not MB (Bad as they are chemically treated). Perhaps the Vo Tech school could take this on as a project or even the shop students at one of the high schools.

As I close, please be aware that I do not own a building, vacant lot or have any business interest or own any property in the downtown area. Yet, I see the revitalization of downtown as critical to our future. Visitors will not come because we have franchise businesses on Hwy. 331. They will come because we have an unusual history and beautiful architecture. We need to protect and preserve those assets. Please get involved in your past because it is your future.

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