

WILLIAMSPORT SUN GAZETTE  
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## IN WILLIAMSPORT

# Project aims to connect neighborhoods, downtown

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A new initiative to explore the city's "Heart and Soul" soon will tap the minds of local residents as it explores ways to revitalize neighborhoods and strengthen connections with the downtown area.

Toward that end, the Susquehanna Greenway Partnership recently received a \$25,000 grant from the Pennsylvania Humanities Council and the Orton Family Foundation, which devel-

oped the Community Heart and Soul method of community planning and development in small cities and towns.

"The grant is allowing us to go into the neighborhoods surrounding the downtown of Williamsport and ask people to tell us their stories. Through storytelling, we can dig a little deeper into what people truly value," said Alice Trowbridge, partnership project coordinator.

The project will be done in collaboration with the Lycoming County

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

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**Alice Trowbridge, partnership project coordinator**

Celebrates the Arts Alliance, Our Towns, Short Mountain Group, Hands on Heritage, Lycoming County, City of Williamsport, Lycoming College, Penn Strategies and the Pennsylvania

Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

"We hope to find people that (represent) some new leadership in the commu-

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nity that aren't currently active in public engagement, whether it be local government or activities in the area," Trowbridge said.

Still in the brainstorming phase, ideas are being shared for ways to reach voices in the neighborhoods surrounding Williamsport's downtown area. Connections may be made through group meetings in neighborhoods or block parties.

"We're developing a team of people and figuring out how we're going to outreach. We're in the early stages, just pre-planning. The events themselves won't happen until the summer time," Trowbridge said.

Trowbridge said that Williamsport has been active in revitalizing the downtown area as well as reconnecting with the Susquehanna River, and this project will be an extension to connect the downtown to the surrounding neighborhoods.

"To have a downtown be vital and active, there needs to be a connection to the neighborhoods. There's been some great revitalization in the downtown, but there could be a stronger connection to the neighborhoods," Trowbridge said. "Setting a vision for revitalization will only be effective if we can hear the people who live and

work in these towns."

Strengthening the connection is essential to Williamsport's future.

"To be able to get those who live just outside of the downtown to start coming back into it is vital for the long-term viability of the city," said Jason Fink, vice president of the Williamsport/Lycoming Chamber of Commerce.

To help connect the downtown to the neighborhoods, the team wants to identify what the needs are.

"We want people to feel safe walking downtown and home again. Are there activities that people would want to be going back and forth to do? What can we provide?" Trowbridge said.

The only way to know what people want is to talk to them and learn their backgrounds, and that's what the project aims to do.

"The Heart and Soul process goes beyond just what people want to change. It's finding out their personal values and how that relates to living where they live," Trowbridge said. "That's why storytelling is so important. People share those personal characteristics when they tell their own stories."

Judy Olinsky, vice president of Lycoming County Celebrates the Arts Alliance, agreed.

"Connecting to the arts is something we have

been doing all along through Our Towns and through the arts alliance. Through the Heart and Soul program, we're just getting more techniques and more people together to reach the values of our community," Olinsky said.

Kim Wheeler, deputy director of the county department of planning and community development, said that the program will fit in nicely with the county comprehensive plan.

"We have seen more and more diversity in our community. We've seen the same people take part, and we hear from the same people ... It isn't always representative of the full spectrum of people and interests that have made up our community," Wheeler said.

When trying to plan the best interests for everyone, there's no better way to do it than to hear from as many community members as possible.

"We try to represent the interests and the diversity out there, but we can't do that any better than the people who actually represent those interests being at the table," Wheeler said. "That's why it's important for us to have a real emphasis on reaching out to people."

For more information, visit <http://heartofwilliamsport.org/>.