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CARA MORNINGSTAR/Sun-Gazette

William Prince, left, program manager of the trail town program with the Progress Fund, David Stone and Bridget Kane look at an informational kiosk during the visitor readiness assessment off of Third Street in Williamsport on Tuesday. Participants explored the downtown, looking for signs that would inform visitors of what there is to see and do.

Welcoming signs

Assessment eyes Williamsport's marketability

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The Susquehanna Greenway Partnership led a visitor readiness assessment in downtown Williamsport on Tuesday in an effort to find ways to better roll out the welcome mat to those considering the city as a destination.

Members of the community were invited at the beginning of the assessment to come to the Genetti Hotel, where they were told to pretend they were visitors new to the area looking for signs, visitor information, guides and anything visitors might like, including places to sit, to park and to use bathroom facilities.

Participants broke off into three groups led by Trish Carothers, executive director of Susquehanna Greenway; William Prince, program

manager of the trail town program with the Progress Fund; and Grace Markum, High Impact² Inc. facilitator.

"We look at a visitor's perspective, how they go into communities, where they go, what they see and do. We also focus on the connections between recreational trails, rivers and the cultural elements and how to physically connect them, as well as marketably connect them. We identify the good, the bad and how things can be improved," Prince said.

"Our expertise would be telling what other communities are doing and their resources to try to match them up with a community's needs," Markum said.

Although they looked at what draws people to Williamsport from many angles, the main focus is to give better access to river and outdoor

recreation. One of the issues for the assessment was the difficulty in getting to the Susquehanna River Walk from the downtown.

Although there is easy access to the walk in South Williamsport, a pedestrian must cross heavy traffic to get to it from Williamsport. Making things as easy as possible for visitors motivates them to spend money in the community, it was noted.

"The outdoor recreation, river recreation and trails is a growing market. There are people coming to do trails and experience new areas as well. For businesses and communities, it's a new market that can boost sales," Prince said.

Another point that was made in the discussion was a noticeable disconnect from the downtown area to neighbor-

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Assessment looks at Williamsport through the eyes of a visitor to the area

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hoods, and that there is no easy walkable path from Lycoming College to downtown.

Some intersections just outside the direct downtown area are very confusing, making it difficult to get downtown, it was noted. Hepburn and Basin streets were named as potentially difficult areas to navigate.

The Susquehanna Greenway Partnership works with the Small Business Development Center at Lock Haven University and the Williamsport-Lycoming Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau to verify any existing plans to change the community as well as identify key issues.

"Part of the reason for that is that we want to make sure there's plan concurrence, that there isn't just 10 people that want something in the community. Funders



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Grace Markum, facilitator with High Impact² Inc., left, goes over the experience of the visitor readiness assessment at the Genetti Hotel in Williamsport on Tuesday. Participants in the assessment went around downtown to evaluate the ease of access and available information to visitors before meeting back at the Genetti to discuss the results.

want to be able to see and identify through a public input process that the community does want these and see that there

have been plans working towards it. They know these are viable projects to fund," Carothers said. After the participants

toured the area with a more critical viewpoint, they met up back at the Genetti to discuss results of their findings and fill

out surveys, rating things they saw or did not see. For instance, one question asked whether

sidewalks were large enough to handle pedestrian traffic. Another question asked if the time for a crossing at intersections was long enough for an elderly person to cross.

The results of the surveys will be evaluated along with those of many actual visitors who filled out surveys rating the area. Once the results are evaluated, there will be another meeting open to the public in October or November to discuss the results and what might be done to improve any problem areas.

"You have an awesome town here just in the eight years I've been here, and I know there's people working really hard to make additional improvements. We have our workshops coming up end of October or beginning November, but get those people you know out in the community that really care to attend it," Carothers said.