

The Oldham Era

Chamber of commerce relocates to historic train depot

By Jacquelyn Stoess

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While relocation of the Oldham County Chamber of Commerce to the historic train depot may require a few extra steps down Main Street for visitors, for the chamber and its associated organizations it means much more -- specifically, more space, more storage, more parking and more restrooms.

And the move may lead to more development for that end of Main Street.

The chamber recently moved to the depot located at 412 E. Main St. -- a building renovated during the past eight months. The chamber was previously located about two blocks down Main, between Friends & Fiber and Sign of the Times.

Chamber President Joe Schoenbaechler said it's quieter being in the depot than the organization's former home, located among retail shops, neighboring restaurants and other businesses. He said the chamber's new location has a different character.

Additional parking is a huge benefit for the chamber at its new location and the shops near its former location. It ensures that chamber visitors will no longer fight retail customers for parking spaces, Schoenbaechler said.

Oldham County government acquired the depot as part of the Greenways project. A large part of the renovation included making the building handicap-accessible and constructing an entrance ramp, in addition to paint, carpet, lighting and parking lot improvements. The renovations were funded by grants awarded to the Greenways of Oldham County organization, formed by Paul Clinton in 1997, to create parks and greenway corridors throughout the county.

The historic depot serves as the trailhead for the interurban greenway planned by the organization for Oldham County. The 13-mile trail will follow the railroad tracks on Ky. 146 from the depot in La Grange to Pewee Valley's town square. Once complete, it will connect the cities of La Grange, Buckner, Crestwood and Pewee Valley, and will provide a path to bike and walk to the Oldham County YMCA, to South Oldham and Oldham County high schools and to the pool and playground in Wendell Moore Park. It will be known as a linear park -- the largest park in Oldham County.

The La Grange section begins at the depot on East Main Street, which it follows in front of the courthouse to Sixth Avenue. While there is not a timeline in place for the entire

trail, Greenways' focus now is completing a half-mile section in La Grange and finding funds for sections near Crestwood and Buckner.

Greenways is run by seven-member board.

Board member Judy Hall said the trail anchors -- the depot La Grange and town square in Pewee Valley -- were obvious choices for visitor parking.

"We [chose the depot] as what we hope will be an enhancement for downtown La Grange," Hall said.

Greenways applied for grant funding for the first phase of the project in 1998, including the depot and six-tenths of a mile of trail. Hall said many grants through the Kentucky Department of Transportation are funded by federal gasoline tax revenue for historical preservation and alternative transportation, which includes walking and biking trails.

While renovation of the depot cost more than the organization expected, Hall said the board is excited to see the beginning of the first phase of the trail.

"Benches and signage haven't gone up yet, but it is happening -- we're excited the first phase has begun." Hall said.

Hall joked that she was beginning to wonder if construction of the trail would happen in her lifetime. After seven and a half years working with the project, Hall said it isn't moving as quickly as expected because a bulk of the work is groundwork preparation for the trail.

"It has been a long process and we are very appreciative of the fact that it is finally coming into fruition, at least on the La Grange end," she said.

Hall said she knows the project will soon progress rapidly.

"Once we get two or three portions down, we're well on our way," Hall said. "People will be walking on it and will want to see it completed."

People don't realize the value of a greenway trail to a community in terms of tourism, Hall said. Trails of Greenways' type nationally provide an average of 12 percent appreciation to property values. Area businesses will profit immensely from the number of people the trail attracts, she said.

Clinton said the depot seemed like a great place to start the trail, which needed a location for public restrooms. The building was for sale when the project was conceived, he said.

"It's a really cool, historic building," he said. "We wanted to have a trailhead right in town, and it seemed like a great fit for the chamber and economic development people to

be there."

Clinton said when visitors come from other places and find the trailhead, they'll be able to get more information and maps at the chamber.

While the amount of foot traffic the chamber sees has slightly diminished, Schoenbaechler said most newcomers to the community are already seeking the chamber when they visit La Grange.

"As long as the community has recognized we moved and continues to send them down [to the depot] we should be fine," he said.

As part of the move, the chamber and its associated organizations -- the Oldham County Tourism Commission, Crossroads La Grange Main Street Program and the Oldham County Economic Development Authority -- took the step to encourage other businesses to move to that stretch of Main Street.

With the chamber anchoring the east side of Main and the history center anchoring the west side, Schoenbaechler hopes to make Main Street more than the single block that people see it. While it may take a few years to "fill in the gaps" through the historic area of La Grange, the move is a move toward development, he said.

"You can't expect a restaurant or business to move down here by themselves," he said. "It makes sense for us as a community organization to do so."

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