

Blueprint Communities Program Helping Shinnston, Salem

By GARY A. HARKI
For The State Journal

A new program by Federal Home Loan Bank Pittsburgh is helping two West Virginia towns plan ways to revitalize their communities.

Shinnston and Salem are two of 10 West Virginia communities selected to the program that, if successful, will spread to more communities in Maryland next year, said Lu Bush, a leader on the project through WesBanco Bank.

"It focuses on community revitalization and training," she said. "They want to give you the tools for leadership as well as a focus on sustainable community development. For example, if you wanted to do a housing project, this would help you develop a business concept in that area and help give you information, tools and

networking to get the project off the ground."

In May 2006 a fire in downtown Salem destroyed five buildings, leaving much of the center of town in ruins. Dr. Joe Audia said he hopes the training and expertise he and others from Salem are being given as a part of the Blueprint Communities program helps to revitalize the downtown.

"We are getting a wealth of knowledge on training, community development, planning," he said. "One of the tenants of the teaching is that the community needs to help itself. This is not an entitlement program."

A small grant of less than \$2,000 is a part of the program, but Audia said he believes the real benefits of the program are learning how to engage people in the revitalization of the community.

"We learn how to encourage people to get involved in community development and support a plan," he said.

Already a plan is in place to get the community involved in cleaning up and beautifying the downtown as a result of Blueprint Communities, he said.

"We are having a day when the community will help by sweeping the streets, in conjunction with the city," Audia said. "We will also be planting flowers and doing basic cleanup. It is a way to get more people involved."

Because of the program, Shinnston planners are mapping out the community's assets with the help of a survey.

"Our first workshops were trying to teach the groups to work together and to try to get us to become a team and think about what really were the first steps to building our communities,"

said John Greco, Shinnston spokesperson for the Blueprint Communities project.

More than 400 surveys were sent out to people in the community. About 13 percent have been sent back with responses, Greco said.

"They are filled with all kinds of great ideas, things that people feel the community could do better," he said.

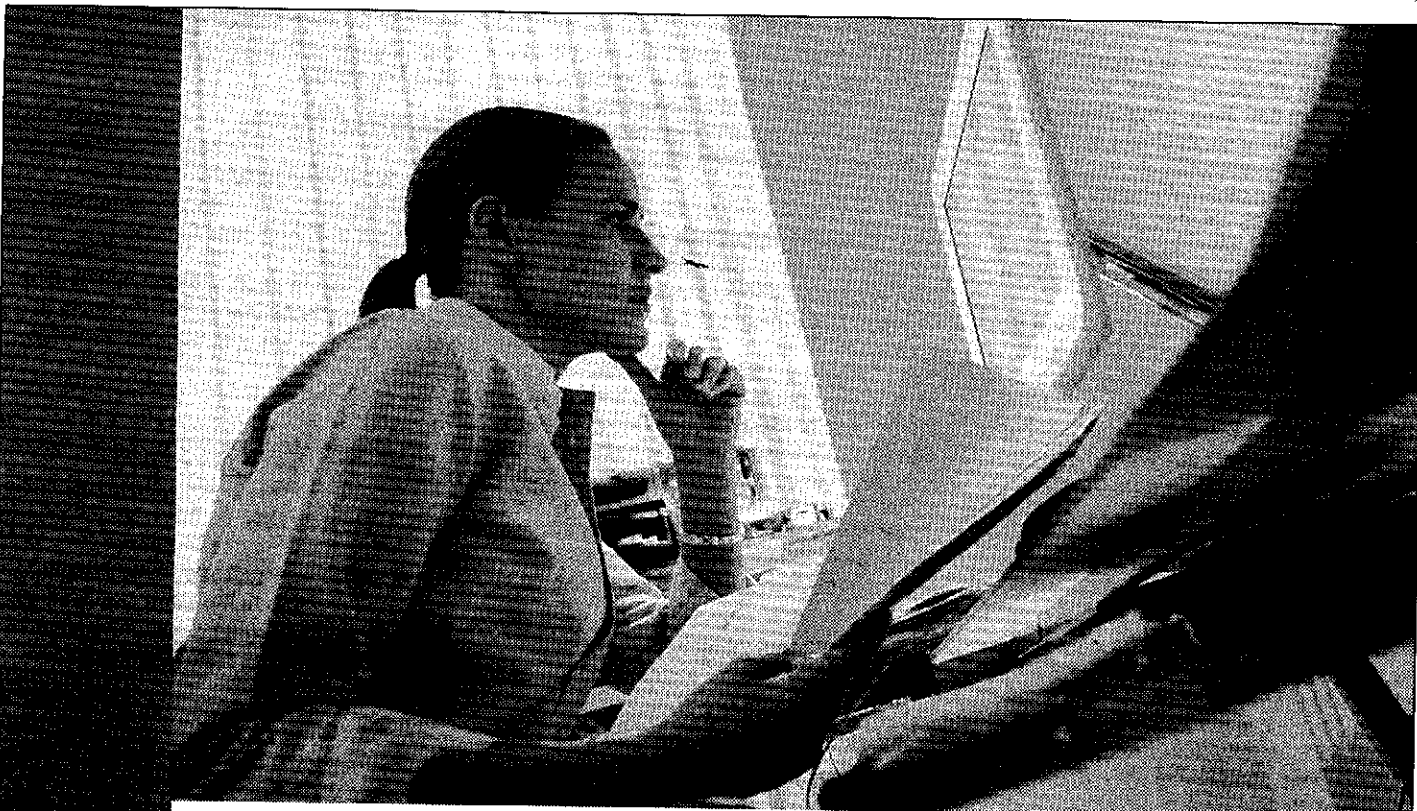
The project also has sparked a redesign of the Shinnston city Web site, Greco said.

"People coming into the area need to know that this is a good place to raise a family. This Web site will help us do that," he said.

A lot of what Blueprint Communities does is to spread information to communities and to help them identify what residents want to see happen in their town, Bush said.

"When the fire destroyed a city block in downtown Salem ... it really took the spirit out of the downtown," she said.

"We can attract new businesses to come to Salem and look at new development for the community. We need to find how to market ourselves and attract new businesses."



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Morgantown Ranks High in Annual National Surveys

By PAM KASEY

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MORGANTOWN — Morgantown continues to rank highly among cities its size, as seen in two annual national rankings.

Forbes Magazine rated Morgantown ninth among Best Small Places for Business and Careers for 2007.

The city placed fifth in Inc. Magazine's Boomtowns 2007: Top 20 Small Cities for cities with employment bases under 150,000.

Forbes ranked Morgantown among "small places": all Metropolitan Statistical Areas smaller than the top 200 by population, which this year includes cities up to 232,000. The population of the Morgantown MSA is 115,000.

Taking a broad measure of quality of life each spring, Forbes compares the cities' costs of living and doing business, crime rates, culture and leisure amenities, job growth and educational attainment.

As in 2006, the Dakotas dominated the top of Forbes' list, with Sioux Falls, S.D., once again in the top spot and Bismarck and Fargo, N.D., among the top four.

But Morgantown was edged out from its 2006 number five ranking by Columbia, Mo.; Iowa City, Iowa; Bloomington, Ind.; and Rapid City, S.D. Las Cruces, N.M., slipped to No. 8 from No. 4 last year.

While Morgantown's rankings in cost of living, income growth and job growth improved slightly, the city dropped from the No. 2 spot in crimes per 100,000 and slipped in culture and leisure amenities as well.

Huntington ranked No. 130 this year, down from 120 last year, and Charleston ranked at 166, down from 161.

In a ranking focused specifically on growth, Inc. compares a weighted index of current year, recent, mid-term and long-term growth.

In Inc.'s ranking, Morgantown rose from No. 12 in 2006. This year's No. 5 ranking places it behind top-ranked St. George, Utah, Yuma, Ariz., Prescott, Ariz., and Naples-Marco Island, Fla.