

# First city revitalization meeting attracts 80-plus to BC3

“The rising tide raises all ships,” downtown representative says

Dec. 21, 2017



Kim Reamer, executive director of the Community Health Clinic of Butler County, speaks to a crowd of more than 80 gathered Wednesday, Dec. 20, 2017, for the first City of Butler revitalization convener meeting at Butler County Community College.

(Butler, PA) That the first drew more than 80 public and private stakeholders to Butler County Community College on Wednesday signals widespread support for the collaborative effort to

invigorate the economy of the county seat and specifically, its downtown, Mayor-elect Ben Smith said.

The size of the crowd, which included state Sen. Scott E. Hutchinson, R-21, of Oil City; Butler County commissioners; BC3 trustees; City Council members; business owners and civic leaders, shows “There are people who care about the city,” said Smith, who will be sworn into office Jan. 2.

“There is a real understanding that you have to start inward and work out from there,” Smith said. “And so the focus being on the city is important because it is not only the county seat, it is what people visualize Butler County as being. When you talk about Butler County, people envision Main Street, Butler.”



Ben Smith, mayor-elect of the City of Butler, speaks to a crowd of more than 80 gathered Wednesday, Dec. 20, 2017, for the first City of Butler revitalization convener meeting at Butler County Community College.

BC3 is serving as convener and educator for the initiative as an objective of a 2017-2022 strategic plan approved by the college’s board of trustees in June, President Dr. Nick Neupauer said. The plan was also presented to regional officials and chief executive officers in October.

“We have had a lot of opportunities to study a number of different economic models, in Altoona; Indiana, Pennsylvania; Montgomery, Maryland; Walla Walla, Washington; and Lorain, Ohio,” Neupauer said. “The key to all of those was a relationship with an institution of higher education and more specifically, in most of those cases, a community college.”

As a convener, Neupauer said, BC3 is not a superhero whose goal it is to “rescue” the city of Butler.

“I cannot emphasize that enough,” he said. “Our role is that of convener and educator.”

Yet, he said, “Look around. I am not quite sure we have ever held an event in my 11 years as president where we had so many dignitaries and VIPs who were all in the same room for the same purpose.”

A convener will create opportunities for all players to collaborate under one roof, Neupauer said.

“It is extremely encouraging to have BC3 as the convener, because it gives (the revitalization initiative) that foundational trust and integrity that we have needed this entire time,” City Council member Kenny Bonus said. “It also gets everyone on the same page to be able to share their thoughts and opinions. So therefore you have buy-in from all the various entities.”

Audience members were asked to consider the vision and mission of their organization; their ideas to revitalize downtown; their role in that revitalization; and what efforts they have made to express that role.

“This is encouraging because we are at this critical mass,” Smith said. “We have little projects going on here and there. For decades, some of them have been happening. Having everyone in the same room, and knowing we are working to get on the same page, shows great promise.”

Jared Sullivan, who Jan. 1 will become president of the Butler Downtown Association, agrees.

“The momentum is here right now,” Sullivan said. “There is a lot of momentum going forward and the next couple of years hold a lot of good things if we all get on the same page.”

Those good things start in the center and expand, said Robert Dandoy, a member of the Butler Downtown Association.

“We have to focus on that Main Street area and start to rebuild there,” he said. “As that happens, then it starts to spread out into the other areas. ... The rising tide raises all ships.”

During her presentation, keynote speaker Briana LaVorgna, dean of community engagement and partnerships at Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College, Moorefield, West Virginia, suggested the City of Butler initiative consider following a model used by her institution in concert with public and private entities.



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Briana LaVorgna, dean of community engagement and partnerships at Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College, Moorefield, West Virginia, speaks to a crowd of more than 80 gathered Wednesday, Dec. 20, 2017, for the first City of Butler revitalization convener meeting at Butler County Community College.

A consortium, she said, should be highly organized, with structured meetings, include traditional and nontraditional stakeholders, actively engage those in attendance and be consistent in its communication, organization and model.

“The individuals who were here today came with the passion and positivity,” LaVorgna said. “Everyone here in this room wants the same thing. And I think that is going to be the fiber that is going to weave your quilt on making true progress happen here.”

The City of Butler revitalization initiative is already ahead of the game, she said.

“You already have the buy-in,” she said. “You already have the energy. You already have the expertise. Now all you need is to bring everyone together to break down the siloes and say, ‘What you are doing in Group A and what you are doing in Group B is the same thing. How can we work together to work smarter, not harder?’”

Stakeholders will be notified about the next meeting in January, Neupauer said.



Jack Cohen, left, president of the Butler County Tourism and Convention Bureau; and Kenny Bonus, Butler City Council member, are shown Wednesday, Dec. 20, 2017, at the first City of Butler revitalization convener meeting at Butler County Community College.