

Marion's Pop-Up program earns recognition from Virginia Municipal League

Stephanie Porter-Nichols | Staff | Posted: Tuesday, October 13, 2015 5:34 pm

Marion is doing something right, and people across the country want to know what the secret is. Truth is, there's no secret and guesswork isn't needed. Ken Heath is happy to share the details of the plan that has renewed and revitalized the town and earlier this week garnered its leaders a third Virginia Municipal League Achievement Award.

Heath, the town's director of community and economic development, regularly spends the early morning hours when most folks are trying to grab a couple more hours sleep surfing the Internet. He catches up on news and is always open to ideas. Several years ago, an idea took hold. Following the Great Recession, a trend was taking place in larger cities in which big-name retailers or celebrity chefs would "pop up" a business temporarily in a vacant space to create buzz. Heath wanted to fill vacant spaces, but for the long term. During the recession, downtown Marion's vacancy rate had spiked to 17 percent.

Heath developed Marion's Pop Up Business Boot Camp, which began as an eight-week, intensive entrepreneur training program for both individuals who wanted to start a business and seasoned small-business veterans.

The training would help address one of the biggest challenges for entrepreneurs – creating a solid business plan.

However, one of the other biggest problems for those wanting to start a business is finding start-up cash.

Heath went after grant funding. The Virginia Main Street saw potential and provided \$15,000. Over time, Wells Fargo Bank joined the program's backers adding to the grant pool.

At the training program's end, business leaders would present their business plans. The best ones would get \$5,000 to get their plans in motion as well as ongoing mentorship, advertising credit and networking opportunities.

The first boot camp was offered in 2012. Marion hasn't looked back.



VML award

Marion has earned the VML's Achievement Award in 2002, 2012 and 2015.

In presenting Marion with its third Achievement Award, the VML noted that downtown Marion's vacancy rate is now about 4 percent, which makes it one of the most successful Virginia Main Street Programs. It's created about 87 new jobs and resulted in an estimated \$1.5 million in private reinvestment.

The entrepreneurship development program has won numerous awards, including the Award of Excellence from the Virginia Downtown Development Association, and the Community Development Award from the Virginia Economic Development Association, and led to the town of Marion being named "Small Business Community of the Year" by the U.S. Small Business Administration.

Beyond the awards are the calls and visits from other communities near and far who want to see and learn what Marion is doing. The town's Pop-Up program success got the attention of Virginia's governor, who asked for a presentation at a state economic development conference. At last year's VML conference, Heath and Olivia McDonald, Downtown Marion's director, offered the workshop three times – each to standing-room-only crowds.

The duo traveled to New Orleans to present the program information to a national conference. Now, Marion's Pop-Up model is being used across the commonwealth and in several states.

Last month, The News-Gazette in Monticello, Illinois, wrote an article headlined, "Monticello likes small Virginia town's revitalization program." A town official had seen one of the presentations and wanted to know more and contacted Heath, who readily provided a packet of information. "We need to encourage each other," he told the newspaper.

More than money

Encouragement was part of what Heath wanted to restore in Marion when the program got under way. In a recent interview, he remembered seeing desperation in people when the Great Recession hit and sitting and crying with merchants. People needed encouragement, he said. They needed someone to say "it will get better."

Even before the economy crashed, Heath knew people needed to see the community with renewed eyes. In around 2000, he said, the town was starting to see success after losing multiple anchor stores in the mid-1990s and a magazine was going to feature it. A reporter was sent to Marion. The journalist stopped at a few places and was told "there's nothing to do here." The magazine killed the story.

Heath said the town printed maps for stores to give out and offered customer service training, but officials still wondered "how do you inspire people to be proud of their community."

Heath said he realized part of it came down to inspiring people to pursue their dreams and make a difference in their community. "The biggest thing is to get local people inspired to be part of the change," he said.

Heath believed the Pop-Up program would fill stores. The unexpected result, he said, was the community's knowledge that it can be and will get better. "Heart has been restored," he said.

People are realizing, he said, that they can have a vision for their community and follow through to achieve it. He encouraged individuals with ideas to seek him out. "If they have ideas and want to work on it, I'm available," Heath said.

As Heath reflects on Marion now, with two community colleges offering classes in the downtown, the first class of Emory & Henry College's School of Health Sciences under way, the Henderson School of Appalachian Arts offering programs, restaurants open, and an active night life, he simply said, "It's pretty cool... just seeing the excitement. For the first time in my life Marion has momentum."

Heath's quick to give credit to others, including the town staff and council and many people in the community who have envisioned better times. He acknowledged the late Henderson Graham, who worked diligently to get the former hospital into Emory & Henry's hands; Dianne Pennington and Ronnie Harrington, who initiated the restoration of the Lincoln Theatre; the folks behind Song of the Mountains; and downtown merchants.

Looking forward

Heath cautions that there may be obstacles along the way. "We can't control the world and national economy," he said. Nonetheless, he believes the momentum and hard work are still moving Marion forward. He's encouraged that four individuals are vying for the seat on the town council left open by the death of Jim Owens. He's equally encouraged that younger people are opening businesses. He hopes those younger individuals will get more engaged. "We need their voices," he said, both as entrepreneurs and in government matters.

Southwest Virginia communities are working together and striving to create a brand so people will immediately get a vision as they do now when someone mentions the Poconos or the Outer Banks.

"We've got all the pieces," said Heath, adding that the town shouldn't rush but understand the value of timing.

The Pop-Up program is still evolving. The next round of classes is scheduled for Tuesdays in November at 6 p.m. at the Henderson School of Appalachian Arts. The five-week class is offered free of charge and open to everyone. Qualifying businesses can be eligible for up to \$5,000 in start-up grant funding and an additional \$15,000 in low-interest loans to open in the town of Marion.

Heath is also working to get grant money to fund building renovations through the program.

For the success to continue, Heath declared, "We have to continue to believe in the community."

He added, "Work with me, and we'll fight dragons together."