New Lebanon’s Future Looks Bright

September 12, 2014 by eastwickpress · Leave a Comment

by Thaddeus Flint

At last month’s New Lebanon Town Board meeting, Town Supervisor Mike Benson wondered aloud whether his fellow Board members weren’t “living under a rock” because they had been surprised by the sudden appearance of a museum in their Town. It turns out that there is actually quite a bit more happening in New Lebanon as well. Some residents are grumbling that all these happenings are happening in private, where the average resident has no say in future projects that could concern them. Perhaps it was because of these grumblings that the September Board meeting Tuesday night started off with a full panel of those responsible for New Lebanon’s future.

Those invited to update the Board and the Townspeople were John Behan and Michael Allen from Behan Planning, to talk about the Hamlet Plan, Max Gitter, to speak on Economic Development initiatives, David Stocks to give an update on the Shaker Museum, Fiona Lally of the Grow The Valley, to talk on the Shaker Swamp Project, and Ruth Abram, to give an update on the Behold! New Lebanon museum.

Behan Planning is the company hired last year to come up with a working long range plan to revitalize New Lebanon. Allen outlined what had been done so far and what the objectives are for the future. Basically the idea is to come up with a way to make the Town a cohesive, well-planned place that makes people not only want to visit but to open businesses and live there as well. It will take some work, but once clear goals are set and studies are completed Behan will start looking toward finding grants to fund these ideas. “Tenacity,” said John Behan, “and nurturing. That’s what it takes.”

Tenacity is exactly what the Economic Development Committee (EDC) has. In just a year the EDC has completed a remarkable list of projects said Max Gitter, the EDC’s Chairman. The Heritage Center is up and running and has had over 1,000 visits. A map of Historic New Lebanon was created and printed in time for the beginning of summer. The guide is now in its second printing, totaling 25,000 copies. Google’s maps were also updated. Apparently most things weren’t where they should have been online and in GPSs, and people coming from out of town looking for them were wandering about lost. The EDC also continued to try to get broadband internet in the Town, set up a training seminar to help local businesses promote themselves online and helped to replace Bank of America with the much friendlier Berkshire Bank.

Gitter said the EDC has studied the success of the town of Saranac Lake. “It was a dump in 1980,” said Gitter. But when the EDC went up to look things over lately they saw what New Lebanon could be. “Boy, did they turn that town around,” said Gitter. “We learned a lot of lessons.”
Those lessons will be well put to use in the coming year. The EDC’s goal is to get a supermarket for New Lebanon. It’s a goal that others have also had, but so far it remains an elusive one.

Gitter feels confident. “We’re going places,” he said.

Parts of New Lebanon have already been places. Maine for one. David Stocks from the New Lebanon Shaker Museum talked about how a show at the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, Maine, is showcasing New Lebanon’s history to the world. The Wall Street Journal did a story on it called The First American Modernists. In November “The Shakers: America’s Quiet Revolutionaries” will open at the New York State Museum in Albany. In the meantime, phase one of the preservation of the Great Stone Barn is completed and awaiting phase 2, which will cap walls and build a floor. Additional acreage in the vicinity has been acquired to preserve the rural look of the Museum. Tourism is growing. “The State believes, as we do, that this will be a cultural destination,” said Stocks. “It could, by 2016, be a monumental space.”

Among the many projects and events in New Lebanon, cattle farmer Cynthia Creech, seen here with one of her rare Randall cows, will be demonstrating sausage making along with Phoebe Young this Saturday, September 13, as Behold! New Lebanon, the living museum of contemporary rural American life, continues for a second weekend. Tickets and more information can be found at beholdnewlebanon.org. Photo by Uli Rose.

In the meantime there is the swamp. A swamp might not seem like a great thing to some, but other towns have profited off their swamps, making them eco-destinations that a surprising number of people will choose to visit. New Lebanon’s, the Shaker Swamp, goes one better in that it has historical ties not only to the Shakers but to the Tilden Company, the first
pharmaceutical company in the U.S. “It’s an extraordinarily beautiful place,” said Fiona Lally of Grow the Valley (what was once the Lebanon Valley Business Association), “and it’s already here.” The Shaker Swamp Conservancy, now a 501c3 organization, is working toward making the swamp more accessible. And for those who prefer drier land, work is continuing on the Rails to Trails project that might one day reach as far as Stephentown. “This is a town with tremendous things happening,” said Lally.

One of those things, happening again this weekend, is Behold! New Lebanon, and its founder, Ruth Abram, was on hand to let everyone know how the first week went. Pretty good it turns out. Around 500 tickets were sold and over a hundred people showed up. There have been “rave reviews” said Abram, and plenty of press for New Lebanon, including a large article in The New York Times. “It puts New Lebanon on the map,” she said.