

Financial help aimed at sprucing up downtown Toppenish

by Phil Ferolito

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TOPPENISH, Wash. -- If you own a downtown business and want to make some improvements, you may qualify for up to \$25,000 in matching grants or loans from the city of Toppenish.

This year, city officials have earmarked \$200,000 in old housing rehabilitation funds to the program. The funds came from payments made to the city by property owners who received low-interest loans to rehab their homes in a program that spanned the 1970s and 1980s, said city Special Projects Assistant Tom Kehm.

Half of the \$200,000 will be available for matching grants, while the rest will go toward low-interest loans.

Kehm said business owners who qualify for the program may be able to use the loan to secure the matching grant.

"So they can dump \$50,000 into the building and only have to pay back \$25,000," he said.

The Western-themed downtown area has storefronts dressed in wooden signs and awnings. Vintage street lamps, murals depicting early settlement and culture and an old brick railroad depot converted into a museum also dot the area.

Hoping to keep it that way, the seven-member City Council last Monday unanimously approved the downtown revitalization project.

"We think it's a great opportunity," said Mayor Blaine Thorington. "We are going to advertise this -- we're going to get the word out."

Most of the downtown buildings in this city of more than 9,000 residents are in good shape, Thorington said.

But there are a few empty ones near the intersection of South Toppenish and Washington avenues.

Taverns occupied two of those buildings, but both went out of business a few years ago. A private consulting firm for municipalities occupied the neighboring building, but it went out of business as well. Those buildings were painted last year but are still empty.

It's hoped that the funding options offered by the downtown program may lure new businesses into those empty buildings, Toppenish Chamber of Commerce Director Bethany Carpenter said.

"We want to get those (buildings) filled," she said. "If anyone wants to come and start a business, this would be a good way to start. I think it's a good program."

Only businesses within the downtown area qualify for the program, and matching grants and loans will be issued on a first-come, first-served basis, Thorington said.

But other loan and grant options may be available through the city for businesses outside the downtown area as well, according to a document outlining the program.

Projects that would qualify for the program include improvements to building facades including architecture, doors, windows, awnings, paint and interior improvements that improve energy efficiency and business space.

The project fits into another one that calls for all downtown business signs to comply with a Western theme. Many of them do, but those that don't have about eight years to do so.

The downtown theme and murals and nearby museums are credited with bringing the city back to economic life after the fall of the U&I sugar plant in the early 1970s.

An economic pillar for the city, it provided hundreds of jobs to residents. In fact, there was even a strip of homes devoted to employees called "Sugar Row."

After its collapse due to a poor market, the city fell on economic hardship and businesses began to disappear.

But in the early 1980s, the mural society was formed and later a committee to create the Western theme in downtown, where historic buildings line its center.

Today, tourists are able to tour downtown, museums and the nearly 70 murals throughout the city from a horse-drawn wagon.

"We're just trying to spruce things up," Thorington said.

** Phil Ferolito can be reached at 509-577-7749 or pferolito@yakimaherald.com.*