

Office of Economic Development helps community bring new life to historic train depot

For years, a historic train depot in Rural Retreat sat deteriorating: ivy crawled up the sides of the building, the foundation rotted away, and the exterior walls browned with time. But in 2011, a group of dedicated community



members called the Rural Retreat Depot Foundation (RRDF) purchased the dilapidated building with the hopes of restoring it to its former glory. "The Depot represents the venue that was the foundation in the development of the Town of Rural Retreat in the 1850's, so preserving its heritage is special to our community," said President of the RRDF, Jerry Hurt.

Since the purchase, the group has held countless fundraisers, from auctions to haunted houses to a drawing to win a 1,200 pound Angus beef steer. As the RRDF put the funds toward the restoration of the building, they

simultaneously met to consider potential uses of the depot. To that end, the group sought help from Virginia Tech and were led to the Office of Economic Development. A team of graduate research assistants answered the call, leading the project themselves.

"I was impressed with how the students and the community connected," said John Provo, director of the Office of Economic Development. "There was a real exchange between them. The community appreciated the fresh insights from the students, and the students enjoyed the constructive, critical feedback."

On April 27, the graduate students — Nick Onopa, Maeve Gould, Adam Mawyer, and Faruk Hesenjan — led an open visioning initiative with Rural Retreat community members inside the train depot. The meeting was the culmination of months of research into hard data about Rural Retreat and common practices of other historic train depots across the nation. "No matter how small a building or a site is, it can bring the whole community together, and great ideas may be generated from its very members," said graduate research assistant Faruk Hesenjan. "Community input is certainly an essential ingredient on the planning 'cookbook.'"



Later this summer, the graduate team will present their streamlined list of potential uses for the depot to the RRDF, including ideas like event rental space, a museum, and a farmers market. From there, it will be up to the RRDF to take the ideas and bring new life to the old depot. "We consider this restoration the keystone for the redevelopment of a small town, incorporating new technology within the walls and heritage of the past while providing an exciting opportunity for the future," Hurt said.

To learn more about the Rural Retreat Depot Foundation, visit www.theruralretreatdepot.com. For more information about the Office of Economic Development's study, please contact Sarah Lyon-Hill at sarahlh@vt.edu.

