Community Development Block Grant Study, Dante, Russell County, Virginia

“Building from Ground Zero”

Emory & Henry College
Jake B. Schrum
President
PO Box 947
Emory, Virginia 24327
276.944.

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Dr. Talmage A. Stanley
Professor of Civic Innovation
Director, Appalachian Center for Civic Life
Emory & Henry College
PO Box 947
Emory, Virginia 24327
276.944.6900
tastanle@ehc.edu
PROJECT FOCUS: As part of the efforts of the unincorporated town of Dante, Virginia, to qualify for Community Development Block Grant Funds, through its interdisciplinary degree in Civic Innovation and its Appalachian Center for Civic Life, Emory & Henry College will undertake specific tasks including citizen surveys and community meetings to assess income and interests to reuse and redevelop the Dante Depot.

PROJECT DETAILS:

Course Number, Name, and Instructor: CVIN 400, Senior Project

Community Partner: Dante, Virginia; County Administrator’s office, Russell County, Virginia; Special Projects Manager, People, Inc.

Need: Dante (pronounced “daint”), Virginia, is located on or near the line between Russell and Dickenson counties. Established as a company town owned by Clinchfield Coal, Carter Coal, and/or the Clinchfield Railroad, and at one time serving as the headquarters of Clinchfield Coal, over the last thirty years, Dante, as with the region in which it is located, has experienced a precipitous economic and demographic decline. In 2010, the Dante population was 649. In 2012, the median household income in Dante was $31,665 (compared with $61,741 for the state of Virginia). That same year, the estimated per capita income for Dante was $18,168. The Russell County administrator’s office has described Dante as “ground zero,” for efforts to rebuild the economy of this region. The citizens of Dante have for twenty years been engaged and actively working to redefine and reposition the community, often defying all odds and expectations in their successes. The citizens of Dante have worked with officials in Russell and Dickenson counties to identify significant assets upon which to continue to build and restructure, one of which is the Dante Depot (http://www.danteliveson.org/Pages/default.aspx).

Partly because the work of strengthening and repositioning this community is long-term and multi-layered, and partly because Dante itself, like most former company towns, is unincorporated and does not have a formal town government structure, this has necessitated outside partnership between Dante, Russell County, and People, Inc. Dante has recently received Community Develop Block Grant (CDBG) planning monies from the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development. The partnership called for in this proposal to the Appalachian Regional Commission for the Appalachian Teaching Project, is between Emory & Henry College and the community of Dante, in collaboration with Russell County and the Special Projects department of People, Inc. (http://www.peopleinc.net/).
The role of Emory & Henry is to provide the student support to design and conduct citizen surveys and coordinate community meetings to assess income and interests related to reuse and subsequent redevelopment of the Dante Depot, work called for in the planning grant application. Based on the results of these surveys, community meetings, and data analysis, Dante, in collaboration with Russell County and People, Inc. will be applying for CDBG funds in the next funding cycle, in order to underwrite further economic development initiatives, utilizing the former Dante Depot.

**Number and description of planned meetings with the community partner**
1. Research team will meet with Special Projects coordinator at People, Inc.
2. Research team will meet with civic leaders in Dante
3. Following design and implementation of citizen surveys, results will be reported jointly to People, Inc. and Russell County, and to the people of Dante
4. 1-2 community meetings
5. Final report of research to Dante planning management team, People, Inc., and Russell County

**Overview of the project, including its central focus:**
“Building from Ground Zero” is a partnership with the people of Dante, Virginia, in collaboration with People, Inc. and the County Administrator of Russell County, Virginia; students will provide the necessary research and data for a viable application to the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development for Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds. The people of Dante anticipate the use of CDBG funds to support the long-term economic develop of Dante and the surrounding area, with a re-commissioned Dante Depot as the possible keystone project.

Over the last thirty years, Dante, as with the region in which it is located, has experienced a precipitous economic and demographic decline. In 2010, the Dante population was 649. In 2012, the median household income in Dante was $31,665 (compared with $61,741 for the state of Virginia). That same year, the estimated per capita income for Dante was $18,168.

As part of a community planning effort, Emory & Henry will provide the student support to design and conduct citizen surveys and coordinate community meetings to assess income and interests related to reuse and subsequent redevelopment of the Dante Depot. Based on the results of these surveys, community meetings, and data analysis, Dante, in collaboration with Russell County and People, Inc. will be applying for CDBG funds in the next funding cycle, in order to underwrite further economic development initiatives, utilizing the former Dante Depot.
Students will meet with Special Projects coordinator at People, Inc. and with civic leaders in Dante. Students will design and conduct a survey of Dante citizens, ascertaining income, and interest in the possible directions for economic development in the community. Students will report jointly to People, Inc. and Russell County, and to the people of Dante, the results of the surveys. Students will conduct one to two community meetings, and produce a final report to the Dante planning management team, People, Inc., and Russell County.

Goals and Objectives:
- Students will develop leadership skills and awareness of community assets that can foster sustainability.
- Students will be engaged as active learners and participants in community projects.
- Students will engage in active research to assist Dante, Virginia, to qualify for and win CDBG funds to support economic development, centered on a re-commissioned Dante Depot.
- Students will report findings that identify income eligibility and community wishes about economic development in Dante, and on possible uses of the Dante Depot for economic revitalization in the area.
- Student work in, for, and with the community of Dante will address three goals of the ARC strategic plan
  - Increase job opportunities and per capita income in Appalachia to reach parity with the nation
  - Strengthen the capacity of Appalachian people to compete in the global economy
  - Develop and improve the region’s infrastructure to make the region economically competitive

PROJECT OUTCOMES:
- Students will develop leadership skills and awareness of community assets that can foster sustainability.
  - Students will meet with Special Projects coordinator at People, Inc.
  - Student team will meet with civic leaders in Dante
  - Following design and implementation of citizen surveys, results will be reported jointly to People, Inc. and Russell County, and to the people of Dante
  - 1-2 community meetings to envision possible uses for Dante Depot and the shape and direction of economic redevelopment in Dante
  - Final report of research to Dante planning management team, People, Inc., and Russell County
- Students will be engaged as active learners and participants in community projects
  - Students will meet in weekly seminar with instructor
Students will learn of the process of innovation and social entrepreneurship

Students will travel regularly to Dante to conduct workshops, implement surveys, and hold community meetings

Students will make progress reports and final report to community (see above)

Students will engage in active research to assist Dante, Virginia to qualify for and win CDBG funds to support economic development, centered on a re-commissioned Dante Depot.

Research will include:
- Design of surveys
- Publicity regarding surveys
- Conduct surveys
- Analyze data
- Plan community meetings
- Publicize community meetings
- Conduct community meetings
- Organize results from community meetings

Students will report findings that identify income eligibility and community wishes about economic development in Dante, and on possible uses of the Dante Depot for economic revitalization in the area.

- Prepare and deliver accessible reports for the Dante community
- Prepare and deliver report to the annual meeting of the Appalachian Teaching Project, December 4-5, 2015, in Washington, DC
- Prepare a poster for presentation at the annual meeting of the Appalachian Teaching Project, December 4-5, 2015, in Washington, DC

In presenting findings and the story of project to the 2016 National Civic Innovation, Community Sparkplug Summit at Emory & Henry College, May, 2016, collaboratively sponsored by Emory & Henry College and the Rensselaerville Institute, student work in Dante will address several other ARC Project Outcomes:

- Improved working relationships between academic institutions and local, state, and federal partners in the work of the Commission.
- Opportunities for students to share their research activities in the broader professional community of Appalachian Studies scholars and activists in the Appalachian Studies Association.
- Improved working relationships among the institutions of higher education, their constituent communities, and the Appalachian Regional Commission.
- Improved coordination of research and service efforts/initiatives toward community sustainability

Student work in, for, and with the community of Dante will address three goals of the ARC strategic plan
Increase job opportunities and per capita income in Appalachia to reach parity with the nation
  - Detailed findings about income and education (individual and household), based on the community survey, looking to use these findings in CDBG applications

Strengthen the capacity of Appalachian people to compete in the global economy
  - One long-term outcome of this project is to make the local Dante economy and the economy of western Russell County and eastern Dickenson County more viable, with a more diversified base

Develop and improve the region’s infrastructure to make the region economically competitive
  - A re-commissioned and repurposed Dante Depot will be one more asset-based development on which further economic development can be based.