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City of Galax Moves Forward With Revitalizing Historic Vaughan Furniture Building



In Spring 2019, graduate students in the economic development studio class completed a semester-long planning project for the city of Galax, investigating redevelopment options for a large industrial building within the city's boundaries. The building, known to Galax residents as the T.G. Vaughan Building, was a former furniture factory and once an important part of the city's

economy. However, the Vaughan Building has been vacant since 2004 and is unlikely to see another tenant due to its unique layout, prompting city officials to consider repurposing the historic site.

The economic development studio, led by Scott Tate of the Virginia Tech Office of Economic Development, conducted thorough research on the site and the city of Galax. Students presented their redevelopment plan to City Mayor C.M. Mitchell, City Manager Keith Barker, members of the City Council and Industrial Development Authority, and other stakeholders.

City Manager Keith Barker said he was excited by their plan and he enjoyed the eclectic mix of ideas the students came up with. "I like hearing from multiple perspectives and that's what [this project] did," he said. The students' plan for the building includes an indoor market and event space, retail and dining areas, apartments, office space for business incubators, a courtyard, and a giant furniture park.

Based partly on the students' work, the city of Galax has since secured a grant for a Brownfield study and conducted a technical assessment of the Vaughan Furniture Building site. Discussions with the owners have included how to remove the building from the ownership of Vaughan Furniture and how an organizational structure for ownership will be accomplished. The discussions also involved considering possible tax incentives through Opportunity Zone or Historic Tax credits and looking at how the city can assist through management of the project. The next step is to solicit investors and recruit appropriate developers who want to join in the effort to revitalize the building.

The project will be long-term, but city officials are hopeful that it could establish Galax as a destination in Southwest Virginia. "The Vaughan Furniture Building can be a draw for the community rather than being a vacant building or a greenfield site," Barker said. The 435,000 sq. ft. building would cost millions to demolish and the resulting greenfield site could remain vacant for decades. Revitalizing the building, however, could attract more people to the community and positively contribute to the city's economy and tax revenue, all while preserving the important history of the city.

In addition to helping the city, graduate students involved in the project learned valuable skills that they can apply in their careers. Ashley Posthumus, a Master's student in the Urban and Regional Planning Program, said, "This class was an opportunity for me to work with a client outside of school and gain

experience with a real-world problem that I could face in my career.”

Anna Nagorniuk, who is also working toward a Masters in Urban and Regional Planning said that the project taught her teamwork skills and time management. She also learned more about qualitative and quantitative analysis and became familiar with working on a planning project for a real client. She said that one of her favorite parts of the project was interviewing members of Galax: “During the interviews, it was really powerful to see people’s passion for their community and their personal ideas too.”

Beth Macy, in her best-selling book *Factory Man*, details the importance of the furniture industry to residents of Galax and Bassett, Virginia. Both the graduate students and Galax officials hope that the history of the T.G. Vaughan Furniture Company can be remembered through the building’s revitalization. On the importance of revitalizing historic buildings, Posthumus says, “The history is important to preserve, especially in a place like Galax where [the building] has such a story and at one point, was such an economic driver in the community.”

In addition to the Vaughan Furniture Building project, the city has several other projects aimed at encouraging community vibrancy. For instance, the city is pursuing a housing development that will offer qualified entrepreneurs free residential lots in exchange for relocating to Galax. The city has also utilized grant funding to redevelop older homes within its boundaries and make façade improvements to local businesses. Finally, the city is continuing to invest in its residents through the purchase of an outdoor projector and screen for community movie screenings.

“We’re turning every leaf and rock that we can to help folks,” Keith Barker said.
