***The Grand Vision***

By Rande Davis

The train has left the station and the Poolesville Economic Express is on its way! Its destination is a robust local economy and an assured vibrant quality of life. The time of negativity thinking is over, and the future of Poolesville could not be brighter or bolder. The concern of boarded storefronts and a declining economy are a thing of the past.

Why do I think so? To begin with, Commissioners Brown, Halbrook, and Klobukowski have returned from the annual Maryland Municipal League Convention, and they have come back enthused with hope, infused with energy, and encouraged that we, as a town, are on the right track. Naysayers of attending such events totally discount the value of building key relationships and sharing ideas with those who have experience, and the motivational power that comes from both.

Perhaps a highlight of the convention was a presentation by David Ivan, a community and economic development specialist from Michigan State University. This expert in how communities thrive laid out what is needed for a town’s strong future through what he labels as the five pillars of economic vitality for townships. They are:

1. Support innovation and entrepreneurial development;

2. Make capital investments in infrastructure;

3. Hold onto a commitment to strong quality of place;

4. Foster strong social capital through community networks and engagement and authentic youth participation;

5. Leverage assets through regional partnerships.

If he is right, we have it all. All the pieces to the puzzle are there. I think that all we need to do is to focus on three things: more employment opportunities, enhanced promotion of Poolesville as a leisure time destination for visitors, and structured growth to enable a younger population to choose to live here, perhaps work here, and just as importantly, choose to stay here.

The solution to the town's in-fill problems begins with small, entrepreneurial service businesses. A great example is Corporate Network Services. Our vacant storefronts can be filled by such service companies, a more practical goal than trying to find more retailers. More people working here will increase weekday commerce so lacking now.

Weekend visitation by hundreds of cyclists, soccer players, in addition to the scores of tourists who came here for Heritage Days are a few examples of how a temporary population can boost our economy without the fear of losing our small town qualities. Our weekend festivals remain one of the most tightly-kept secrets to the folks in Leesburg, Gaithersburg/Rockville, and Frederick. We really are a town of the arts, culture, and sports. Those who don’t think so have not attended the ballet, experienced our concerts or art shows, or have not bothered to explore our history. It’s not so much that we need to have a farmers’ market, as we need to promote the fact that we are the farmers’ market. With or without a special day of the month, we have Lewis Orchards, Kingsbury’s Orchard, Mixed Greens, Hearthside Gardens, and Alden Farms. Add to that, we now have Chicque Antiques, Artifacts, and coming soon: The Blue Hearth, a multi-vendor vintage antiques retailer offering revitalized furnishings and upscale home décor ideas and classes to help draw weekend visitors.

Now I know there are many who are appalled at town expenditures for marketing advice by hiring Mike Knapp and eventually another firm to manage the day-to-day operation of marketing the town. Whether he or others are the right persons for the job remains to be seen; however, we cannot rely on volunteer public servants or an overburdened town staff to get this important job done.

While I do not believe any of this this will give us a supermarket, it can lead to a very viable and worthy grocery. Our fear of the super box store is unwarranted as we are very far away from the required population to attract those stores. How far away are we? Our master plan looks to a Poolesville population up to 6,500, maximum. Including the surrounding area, our market population barely reaches 10,000. Box stores look to a population of a minimum of 40,000 to 50,000 or more—usually much, much more.

I think the Stony Springs and Brightwell Crossing developments have brought wonderful new neighbors, and the proposed new townhouses will bring in a younger demographic so important for the vitality of the town. You say you are concerned about increased traffic? If anything new has increased traffic in town, it’s that traffic in the morning and afternoon bringing students to our incredible school. Is that increased traffic worth it? You bet it is.

While we may not all share the same definition of acceptable change, that change and progress are required for the vitality of a community is about as close to a law of science as economics can muster. Stagnant communities almost always become dying communities.