

Bel Air

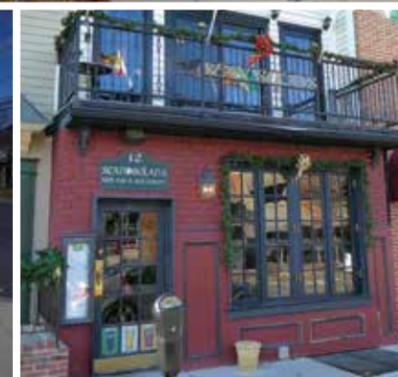
Excitement on Main Street BY LISA BALDINO



Trish Heidenreich,
Director of economic development for the Town of Bel Air

Christine McPherson,
Executive Director, Bel Air Downtown Alliance

Left photo by Terri Heppner, Terilyn Artworks



Downtown Bel Air: Making it Happen

Be a part of it! It's an invitation many can't resist – the chance to have a hand in creating a vibrant community coupled with a robust business landscape. It doesn't happen if people just sit back and watch. No one knows that better than the Bel Air Downtown Alliance.

Celebrating its 15th anniversary in 2016, the Bel Air Downtown Alliance credits the hard work of thousands of volunteers and the support of local businesses, government and economic development for Bel Air's revival over the last decade and a half.

According to Executive Director Christine McPherson, this is another milestone in the

organization's history. "We want to stand firm as an example for the non-profit community as being creative and cutting-edge, yet flexible," McPherson says.

Named to her position just one year ago, McPherson has both planned and acted on items that would get back to what she says are the core values of Main Street Maryland. The Alliance does business according to four pillars: Organization, Design, Promotion and Economic Restructuring. Each of these pillars has a committee assigned to move projects forward. One of the first moves McPherson made when coming on board was to revert back to a dues-paying organization. The



BEL AIR DOWNTOWN ALLIANCE COMMUNITY EVENTS

- Maryland State BBQ Bash**, the Alliance's biggest fundraising effort
- Chocolate Festival**
- First Fridays in Bel Air**
- Family Movie Nights**
- Girls Night Out**
- Annual Christmas Parade and tree lighting**

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result: “We tripled our membership goal,” McPherson says proudly. “I thought it was important to the vitality of the organization. If you’re not a member, there’s no physical buy-in associated with the organization. Everyone thinks someone else will do the work. If there’s more value, there’s more participation.”

The Bel Air Downtown Alliance is part of the Main Street Maryland and the Main Street Program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The organization works closely in a private-public partnership with the Town of Bel Air to maintain the energy of the town, making it a place people want to live, work and play. In fact, the Alliance offices and the town economic development offices share the same building – the Bel Air Armory. Trish Heidenreich, director of economic development for the Town of Bel Air, acknowledges that the relationship is fruitful. “We co-partner frequently and have incentives to promote to businesses and residents,” Heidenreich says. “We try to create community. Our collective improvements have put Bel Air on the map – we have a good police department, it’s a safe place to live, we have a combination of retailers and a number of community activities,” she explains.

Craig Ward, president of the Board of Directors for the Bel Air Downtown Alliance, says the organization does best when they have partners at every level, such as the town, county and the Chamber of Commerce. “We are able to facilitate discussions so that everyone is working together,” he says.

For example, the Alliance is working with both the Town of Bel Air and Harford County as each entity updates its comprehensive plan. Together with the town, the Alliance has also utilized a tourism grant to commission a market study that will help analyze the town’s identity and its strengths for the future. According to McPherson and Ward, the study will help determine the mix of businesses needed to keep the balance in the town, and provide guidance on what they need to be doing to attract both businesses and residents to the downtown area. The results of the study will

also provide the basis for a demographic matrix that can be presented to businesses interested in settling here.

Ward, who was the first chairman of the board of the Bel Air Downtown Alliance in 2002, says the initiative for the Alliance itself came out of a market study. A task force evolved into the Bel Air Alliance, then they pursued 501(c)(3) non-profit status and became independent of the town. Fifteen years later, the group still works successfully and symbiotically with the town and state governments to attract visitors, residents and business through incentives and events.

Among its best known is the Maryland State BBQ Bash, which originated in 2002 as a local event under Ward’s early guidance. Wildly successful, the Bash has grown annually, with this year’s attendance topping 50,000. It is the Alliance’s biggest fundraising effort, and the proceeds are reinvested in local community programs. “The more successful we are, the more we can give back to the community,” McPherson says.

Other community events held by the Bel Air Downtown Alliance are the Chocolate Festival, First Fridays in Bel Air, Family Movie Nights at Shamrock Park, Girls Night Out and the annual Christmas Parade and tree lighting. McPherson notes that all these events are free except the Chocolate Festival, and all are run by volunteers. She said they all have had record attendance in recent years, and the Alliance is always looking for ways to improve them and keep them fresh. This coming year will see the expansion of the Chocolate Festival to two days at the Armory, with a combination of kid-friendly events and adult-only events. Girls Night Out will become quarterly, on the third Thursday of the month, beginning in December. First Fridays, which McPherson says are hugely successful financially, have a new location at the Main Street parking lot between the Tower and the Sheriff’s office.

While these events draw people to the downtown area and to the participating businesses, both the Alliance and town officials recognize the importance of drawing businesses to Bel Air and keeping them involved. Heidenreich says, “The urban landscape for economic development

requires increasing the quality of life.”

The groups have successfully used grant money and donations to develop the Armory and the surrounding area, including Armory Park, into a community center. They have spearheaded the reconstruction of Main Street through the State Highway Administration, and have had two successful façade improvement phases. They are currently awaiting funding for a new façade improvement program that would provide money from the state, matched by the Alliance, and would allow businesses to make improvements on their store fronts.

Heidenreich says business incentives such as revolving loans with competitive pricing, micro loans, parking incentives and arts and entertainment district tax credits are available to businesses through economic development. “The town and the Alliance are always excited and grateful when someone shows an interest in developing business in the town of Bel Air,” she explains. “We want them to know that we’re here for any kind of help – we try to make the ability to run a business as easy as possible, because we want to see every business succeed.”

On the horizon for the Alliance are efforts for continued success in working with the town and local government, attracting businesses and encouraging them to work with each other, and studying the use of open spaces, parking and residential rental properties, according to Ward and McPherson. Ward also says he hopes to get accreditation from the Maryland Nonprofits organization for best practices as a non-profit organization. “This will show that we are good stewards with people’s money, and it will be a great incentive for members and for possible grant funding,” he says.

One of the grants that can help the Alliance as it looks to the future is a technology assistance grant to continue funding the organization’s new website. McPherson said the site logged 22,000 hits for the BBQ Bash alone, and it attracts an average of 11,000 visitors per month. The Alliance is using Google Analytics results to market to those visitors, who include Millennials, the future of the town. “They



are in the forefront of our thinking, and we are giving guidance and input to the town on how to communicate with them,” McPherson says. In fact, the second person on the two-person staff at the Alliance, Roman Davidyuk, is a recent college graduate who is focusing on social media and reaching Millennials. McPherson says he has brought a totally new outlook to the Alliance, and is guiding the online marketing and

technology efforts.

McPherson, embodying the energy and vitality she hopes the town is conveying, says, “This is the beginning of a revitalization – there’s a new energy by the Ma & Pa trail, craft beer is trendy, and there are things happening. Be a part of it – get involved. Don’t sit back and wait.”

To get involved, visit <http://belairmaryland.org/get-involved/>. I95

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