Main Street Association sets sights on downtown history guide

A pedestrian walks on West Texas Street in downtown Fairfield Wednesday. (Robinson Kuntz/Daily Republic)

By Barry Eberling | February 09, 2014 |

FAIRFIELD — A black-and-white photo in the Main Street Association office shows downtown Texas Street from the 1950s, when Fairfield's main drag looked far different.

The photo looks eastward toward Jefferson Street. Such long-gone businesses as a Ford dealership, Garben Hardware and Food Fair are visible.

Bud Tonnesen grew up in Fairfield. For him, the photo brings back memories. He recognized a bell tower visible in the distance as belonging to the old fire station.

"That's Mac's bar," he said. "Right there was the old Red Top Dairy."

Nanciann Gregg also looked at the photo of Fairfield's version of Main Street, USA.

"That's what it looked like when I came here in 1955," Gregg said.

The Main Street Association wants to see if the downtown's glory days can help bring people to the shops there today.

From spring to fall, the downtown has a farmers market on the lawn near the historic county courthouse. If farmers market customers stay there, they hardly set foot in the downtown.

The Main Street Association wants to create a brochure showing historic downtown sights that it plans to hand out at the farmers market that begins in spring. Then the few hundred people who attend the weekly farmers market on an average day can go look at the sights.

“We’re going to promote it there, to get our captive audience strolling through the downtown,” said Margaret Manzo, executive director of the Main Street Association.

When they stroll through the downtown, they might stop at some of the stores and spend money. That’s the association’s ultimate goal.

The Main Street Association conducted a meeting Jan. 29 to get ideas for the historic downtown pamphlet. Tonnesen and Gregg were among the people who attended.

Decisions have to be made about what goes in the pamphlet and what gets left out.

“Our hope is to focus on the main drag and one block north and south,” Manzo said. “We’re trying to support our downtown businesses.”

Plus, she said, the Main Street Association is part of the California Main Street program. One of the criteria is a historical preservation ethic, she said.

Fairfield doesn’t have a downtown from the late 1800s and the horse-and-buggy era, as does many an older California city. Fairfield existed during that period and was the county seat, but not the center of local commerce. Suisun City and its Main Street had most of the hotels, stores and other businesses.

The Fairfield downtown really took off with the dawn of the auto age. Texas Street became part of the state highway system.

Many downtown buildings date from the early 20th century. For example, there’s the old Solano Title Co. building constructed in 1926 at 740 Texas St. It is three stories tall and had the first elevator in Fairfield.

Suisun City and Vacaville already have historic downtown walking tour guides. Now it could be Fairfield’s turn.

Reach Barry Eberling at 427-6929, or beberling@dailyrepublic.net. Follow him on Twitter at www.twitter.com/beberlingdr.