

Oak Ridge Revitalization Effort and historic Guest House/Alexander Inn

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on February 9, 2010)

The web site, www.revitalizeoakridge.org, is the web site of a brave and courageous new organization. It is a local group that is intent upon seeing Oak Ridge return to its glory days when retail shopping at small independent retailers in our original community centers was one of the primary features of our unique and eclectic Oak Ridge.

Remember, we are the city plopped down in the midst of Appalachia in the 1940's that brought culture and refinement to an area that had yet to experience anything like the schools, art, music and culture that was (and still is) historic Oak Ridge. This new organization believes it is possible to recreate and even improve on that early experience. I hope you come to agree with them. I do.

The organization is the *Oak Ridge Revitalization Effort* and their members think we can recreate that ambiance and become once again a beacon in our area of Appalachia that will attract visitors and shoppers beyond anything we have yet seen. I say, more power to them. It is the most refreshing idea I have seen in a while. Go for it ORRE!!!

On the occasion of their first Board of Director's meeting, they graciously allowed me to attend their lunch meeting at the Grove Theater or High Point Community Church lobby – my second visit there and again I am most impressed with what has been done to renovate that historic mainstay of Grove Center. I had an appointment in Knoxville, and thought I would just drop in to the meeting, take a photo and move on to the next event in my hectic schedule. Well, that did not happen.

The food prepared by Mrs. Allred was so tempting that I postponed the Knoxville trip and enjoyed a wonderful lunch of spring greens, creamed corn, excellently cooked pork tenderloin, Sister Schubert's dinner rolls (a favorite of mine!) and an exquisite pound cake with plentiful strawberry and blackberry fruit topping. A very good choice, if I do say so myself!

I saw right away that this group knew how to enjoy the finer things of life! The meal was exceptional. Not only did they understand good food, they were obviously accustomed to getting things done, did not shy away from difficult tasks and had a vision that was easily articulated – “revitalize our historic neighborhoods focusing on the retail centers in Jackson Square and Grove Center.” I like them!

But the latest action taken by this energetic and visionary group is way beyond anything they have attempted thus far. The actions taken to revitalize Jackson Square and Grove Center should not be minimized as they are good and effective actions and are producing results. However, purchasing the historic Guest House/ Alexander Inn is something that calls for even more visionary dedication and faith in our community. It is their faith in the rest of us that is most important.

We must all support them if we as a community hope to see the history of the grand Guest House/Alexander Inn once again shine as a beacon of the strength of community that made Oak Ridge exceptional in years past. We must be relentless in our dedication to the restoration of our historic heritage, of which this grand old structure is the centerpiece.

The ORRE states that, “It is important for the public to realize that the restoration of the Guest House/Alexander Inn is but a small part of the overall revitalization effort...the overall vision of the effort is to promote, protect and enhance historic Jackson Square and Grove Center as the heart of the Oak Ridge Community.”

Oak Ridge Revitalization Effort and historic Guest House/Alexander Inn

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on February 9, 2010)

However, this restoration of the Guest House/Alexander Inn is the true beginning of a ground swell of the rebounding of Oak Ridge as a vibrant alive and growing community. It is the turnaround we need to regain the momentum of prosperity and economic growth. It is a symbol of our past that is now turning into a symbol of our future and key to our drive for success!

Executive Director of ORRE, Kate Groover, says, "Bringing this glorious old Guest House/Alexander Inn back to prosperity will help to foster a community that will be anchored between the two historic shopping centers Jackson Square and Grove Center and their surrounding neighborhoods." The physical separation will be minimized by bike trails and walking trails as well as the synergy that comes from the successful renovations of both communities. Let's find a way to help, each of us!

Kate goes on to say, "Community involvement in every phase of this effort will help to create diverse neighborhoods that include mixed income families and individuals. With cooperation from local realtors, it is our vision that residential neighborhoods will be improved through assistance from ORRE with new designs and showing them how to revitalize their homes to the highest standards of green building technology by including the use of building materials, water and energy conservation and renewable power from the sun."

As you can tell, the ORRE vision goes well beyond restoration of the Guest House/Alexander Inn, Jackson Square and Grove Center retail shopping areas. It extends into the very heart of our communities, the housing as well as the retail sections.

We need to support their efforts in every way possible. What a breath of fresh air such enthusiasm brings to our city. We have a group here who are busy making things happen, not just studying them to death or arguing over what is most important, they are just doing things! What a great model. Let's help!

Here is an eleven point immediate Action Plan for the Guest House/Alexander Inn:

1. Get Liability and Building's Risk policy in place
2. Block off any hazardous areas
3. Begin clean up of exterior
4. Have Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association collect and organize paperwork from the office areas as well as all documentation in the basement
5. Have ORHPA organize all paperwork then go through paperwork to determine what is historic
6. Have ORHPA determine any historic items from guest rooms, lobby, restaurant, etc, including shop and tool room items
7. Have Bear Stephenson go through to determine what might be worthy of auction and move those items to a safe area
8. Have professionals deal with environmental issues

Oak Ridge Revitalization Effort and historic Guest House/Alexander Inn

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on February 9, 2010)

9. Clean out and dispose of everything else using volunteer crews
10. Gut the building with volunteers and/or Morgan County Correction crews
11. Work with architects and engineers on developing a plan for the building

Of course, it must be realized that this list is a preliminary one and that the first necessary step is to convince the court that the organization is making a good faith effort to address the code violations and for the city to give them a reasonable time to do so. Then they can proceed with the above plan of action as well as fundraising for the renovation efforts.

I applaud their initiative and salute them for their willingness to step out and make a difference in two of our historic neighborhoods. Let's all get behind their efforts and support them at every juncture of this historic renovation effort to bring the Guest House/Alexander Inn to the forefront as a shining star in our historic district and future city-wide revitalization.



Oak Ridge Revitalization Effort Board of Directors, from left to right - Howard Harvey, Barbara Ferrell - Vice President, Kathryn Baldwin, Charlie Hensley, Martin Fischer – President, Mary Cox – Treasurer, Bill Cross, Secretary, Ann Jordon, Mark Harvey, Kate Groover – Executive Director. Not pictured are board members John Dolynchuk, Darrell Johnson, Bob Bardoff and Boyd Carter