

# Stellar Approach

## Communities Benefit From State Program

By Paige Ferise

For one Delphi woman, the Indiana Stellar Community program was a lifesaver. With a large payment coming due and no ability to attain a refinanced mortgage because of a faulty roof, the woman was facing the very real possibility of losing her home.

But when the city of Delphi was awarded Stellar funding, it was able to launch an owner-occupied housing renovation effort. The woman was able to have that roof replaced and ultimately qualify for a loan to save her home.

“Those are some of the cool stories you actually hear,” remarks Mayor Randy Strassor of Delphi. And this is hopefully just one of many success stories to come.”

In recognition of the importance of smaller communities, the state created the Stellar Communities program in 2010. Operated by the office of Lt. Gov. Sue Ellspermann, the initiative combines the efforts of three state agencies: Housing and Community Development Authority, Office of Community and Rural Affairs, and Department of Transportation. More than

\$58 million had been invested through early 2014. Two communities have been selected each year since 2011.

*BizVoice* spoke with mayors from the first four Stellar communities:

- Sue Murray, Greencastle, 2011
- Randy Strassor, Delphi, 2011
- Bob Hurst, Princeton, 2012
- Harold “Soup” Campbell, North Vernon, 2012

### Progress and projects

In addition to projects such as the owner-occupied housing in Delphi, Stellar dollars are being used to restore historic buildings. For North Vernon, its self-proclaimed “crown jewel” is the revitalized Carnegie Building, which now houses City Hall.

“It is our hope it will anchor redevelopment and stop the blight,” Campbell explains. “I

think we have started down that road.”

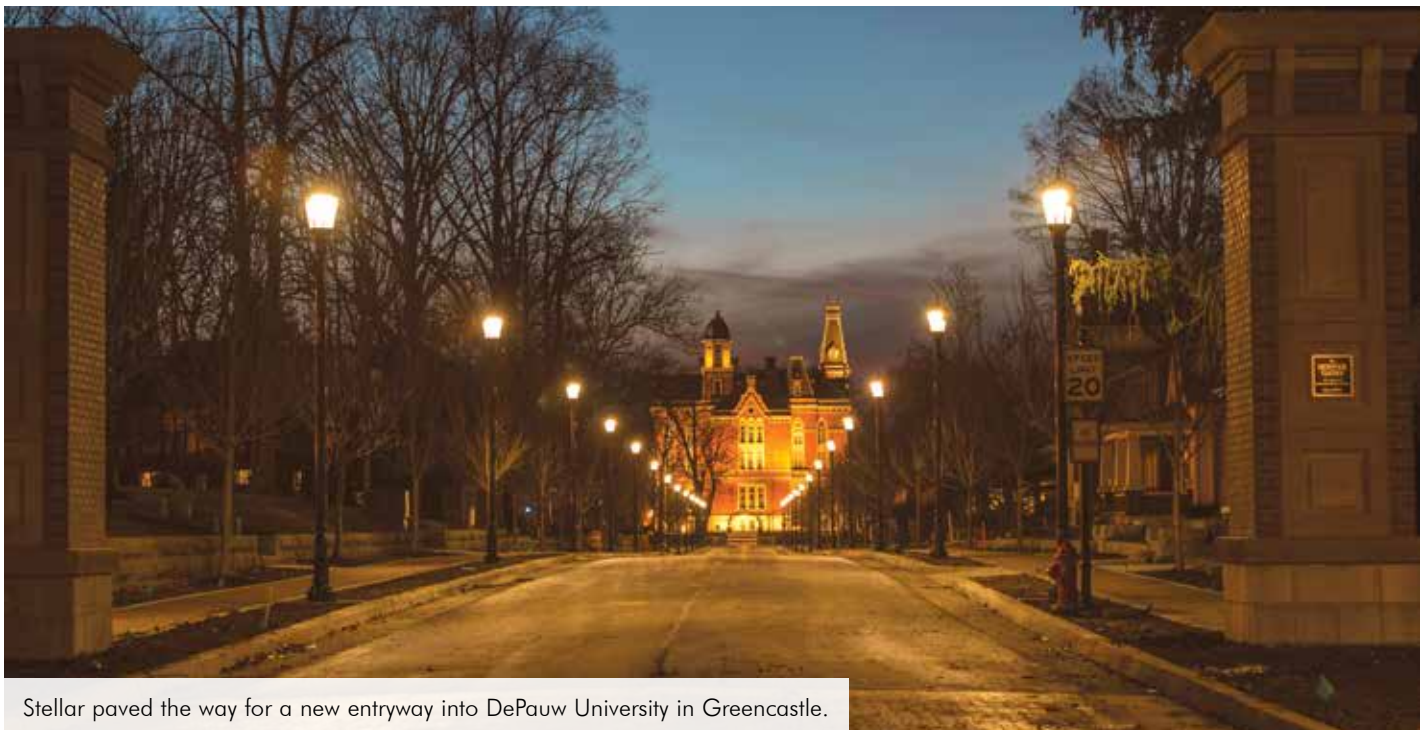
Other communities have seen similar progress. In Delphi, the goal is for improvements to spur more private investments. Strassor terms it a “keeping up with the Joneses attitude.”

Greencastle and Delphi are now three years removed from their Stellar designations.

In Greencastle, a major project has been the downtown university bookstore and Starbucks coffee shop that has created an inviting environment for DePauw students and faculty. Other projects have included home renovations, downtown façade updates and an enhanced Anderson Street entryway into the university.

An ongoing restoration and expansion of the historic Delphi Opera House is complemented in that community by downtown work that includes new façades and streetscapes. Connections of existing trails has been another early priority.

In addition to the physical progress, the Stellar designation has enhanced local self-esteem.



Stellar paved the way for a new entryway into DePauw University in Greencastle.

“To have a small community like ours to see outward and visible signs of progress that were a direct result of Stellar dollars has been something that the community itself has been really proud of,” Murray comments. “It’s been a real positive thing in terms of the attitudes of our local business and industry.”

### Overcoming obstacles

Even with the progress taking place, Greencastle and Delphi struggled early on with the intended three-year timeframe set by the state.

“What we realized,” Murray states, “was that there was a lot more to accessing those funds and moving forward with the process than anticipated.”

JoAnna Mitchell-Brown, Ph.D., is a senior research fellow at the Sagamore Institute for Policy Research, which has been contracted to assess the Stellar program. She affirms the early challenge.

“Communities originally, I believe, had a perception that it was just one big grant. So they got into it not realizing that it was like the grants they (and other communities) were receiving before ... just at a much faster pace.”

As with many new initiatives, Stellar came with a learning curve for the communities and the government agencies alike.

“Over the first two years, what we have been able to determine is that red tape is red tape,” Strassor contends. “I don’t mean that in a bad way, but just for the local and state agencies to do due diligence there are processes there that you just can’t circumvent or do without.”

But the hurdles didn’t keep these communities from pushing through and making progress.

Murray adds, “Aside from all the bureaucratic necessities in order to access federal funds, what we’re talking about is making sure that we’re doing it in a way that

The Short Street Plaza provides a pedestrian-friendly downtown venue in North Vernon.



the state can look at the federal government and say, ‘Yes, we have been good stewards of your dollars.’ And the state can look at us and say, ‘Yes, you’ve been good stewards of our dollars.’ ”

Princeton and North Vernon, awarded the second round of Stellar grants, benefited from the lessons learned in the first round.

“There is quite a bit of involvement. You just have to keep moving. We’ve had a couple of delays, but they haven’t been big,” details Princeton’s Hurst. “I think we’re right on schedule with everything.” That includes a highly-touted Bicentennial Plaza that is serving as a community gateway.

### Community involvement

Change in any aspect is difficult, but citizens – minus a few naysayers, according to each of the mayors – have embraced the progress and supported the projects. For Greencastle, enhancing the relationship with

its prestigious university neighbor has been a particular emphasis.

“DePauw alumni, students, faculty and staff are excited about the accessibility and nicer walkways to downtown,” Murray declares. “Most certainly having their bookstore and Starbucks down there gives them more opportunity to visit and they do in droves, which is exciting to see.”

Greencastle based its Stellar proposal on the idea of creating the next great college town, believing that the city and university were both at their best when working together.

The impact of Stellar has reached far beyond the initial designation. The city has invested nearly \$4 million since 2011 in non-Stellar projects. In addition, community members have contributed funds to continue the work and restoration.

“People see the outward signs and I truly believe people are excited, and the



A transformation is taking place at the Delphi Opera House.



## New Initiative Set to Debut

In late 2014, the state and several university partners announced a new Hometown Collaboration Initiative. The program for communities of no more than 25,000 in population is designed to energize selected areas in one of three ways:

- Grow the community's leadership pipeline
- Enhance development strategies that link to economic strengths
- Pursue "placemaking" activities that add to the community's built and natural resources

The Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs and Lt. Gov. Sue Ellspermann are leading the effort. Partners include the Purdue University Center for Regional Development, Purdue Extension, Ball State University's Building Better Communities program and its College of Architecture and Planning.

Pilot communities are expected to be announced in January.

investment levels in our community by the city itself, by the university and by entrepreneurs who have started new businesses have been pretty significant," remarks Murray, who adds that many businesses have signs posted in search of new employees.

Princeton, home of the Indiana

operation of Toyota Motor Manufacturing, has long benefited from the company's community involvement. Toyota has donated \$1 million to community restoration.

In some communities, residents are waiting to see visible progress.

"It takes so long to start getting results,"



Princeton has a new community gathering point in its Bicentennial Plaza.



Strassor expresses. "We're in such a fast-food, drive-through mentality in the world anymore that it doesn't matter if it's your job or your education or your recreation. Whatever it may be, everybody wants what they want and they want it now, whatever makes them feel good."

North Vernon's Campbell agrees. "I'd say really we have 75% (in support of the projects) and 25% are holding their fire to see the finished product."

But according to all four mayors, the majority of the people are excited and supportive of Stellar and the work that is taking place in their communities.

"All in all we're busy down here, but the changes are good, progressive and I'd say 99% of the people enjoy it," Hurst reveals.

### Looking forward

The Stellar program is an ongoing project – Bedford and Richmond were the 2013 communities selected, with Wabash and Huntingburg tapped in 2014 – and adjustments are still being made.

"One of the recommendations we made to Stellar was to create a roadmap to help communities navigate through the process easier and to help them understand what the expectations are on both ends," says the Sagamore Institute's Brown.

The four initial communities continue to make improvements. Common goals include, but are certainly not limited to, new housing and rehabilitating older homes.

"I can't say Stellar is directly responsible, but Stellar is definitely part of what's happened to us and we're extremely grateful," Murray states. "If we continue to see the investment in our downtown, then people will find us the kind of community that they can feel safe in."

Delphi strives to continue to position itself as a draw for visitors and a destination for those who choose to make new homes in the area.

"We've created the draw (through various tourism attractions)," Strassor points out. "We just need to be able to create the accommodation."

The impact of Stellar has the possibility to continue for years to come.

"They've (community leaders) said people know about us now because of Stellar," Brown concludes. "And if they continue to do that and bring in new businesses and new residences into the community using the Stellar recognition as a catalyst, I think that will lead to long-term economic impact for these communities."