

September 11, 2007

LOCAL EDITORIAL      *Southbridge Evening News*

Changing public perception

It is sad but true. There is a perception among many that Southbridge is a town with not much going for it.

Whether that is an accurate belief is up to debate. There are, however, many individuals working to change that perception.

One of them is Gabriel McCarthy, whose hand has been and is in many renovation projects in town. He worked with two other individuals who share a similar vision of what this community has been and can be. Demetri Kasperson and Monika Agnello want to turn the town into a destination for those whose preferences turn to the artistic.

Southbridge as an art community? One is likely to think of Sturbridge, first. Or maybe Putnam or Woodstock, both just a few miles away in Connecticut. But Southbridge?

The Sevangait's Project Space on Crane Street could help put "Southbridge" on the tip of your tongue when you start wondering where to go to tickle those artistic taste buds.

"A lot of people," said Agnello, "feel it's like a New York arts gallery."

Agnello hails from New York City, while Kasperson is a Woodstock, Conn. native. Both are aiming to take the artistic flavor of their respective homeplaces and drop it smack dab in the middle of Southbridge. Enter McCarthy, who helped locate the pair in one of his buildings.

McCarthy is also one of those behind plans to bring back the "Titanic Railroad," better known as the Grand Trunk Rail Trail. The idea is to make the trail a biking and hiking route, and it is one that is backed by the Conservation Commission.

McCarthy sees the trail as a way to help revitalize the area's economy, which, as evidenced by the plethora of empty downtown storefronts and "For Sale" signs in front of houses, isn't in great shape.

The vision of these and other individuals needs nurturing by town officials and other residents. Southbridge as a depressed, run-down, once-vibrant community is a state-of-mind that only becomes reality when we do nothing to change our way of thinking. There is much to be treasured in this town and no end to what can be if others step up to the plate with their visions and ideas.

Forgetting the petty politics — and the individuals behind it — that often garners the bulk of public attention, Southbridge has quite a lot going for it. The arts, recreation — these are but a couple of pieces vital to putting together a puzzle whose completed picture will be of a town in which its residents can be proud of saying they reside.