

Pacolet highlights spirit of renewal, passion of place at heart of community

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[Editor's Note: This is the third in a series of articles exploring what nearby communities are doing to meet the challenges and opportunities of redevelopment.]

To enter the Town of Pacolet on the eastern edge of Spartanburg County is at first to get a glimpse of the town that was.

It's immediately apparent that Pacolet is another of the state's many former textile communities where that monolithic industry once dominated, but what is less obvious is the resiliency of the people and how they overcame a devastating natural disaster to reclaim their town and rebuild their lives.

The efforts that resurrected Pacolet after the flood of 1903 sprang from a passion for the picturesque river valley and a desire to not only restore what had been lost but to improve it. Few people better exemplify that passion for place and love of community than Mayor Elaine Harris.

To talk to Harris is to get a taste of the infectious excitement about where Pacolet has been and where it is going. She speaks eloquently about the vision for her town that, she admits, takes a little getting used to.

"A lot of people think we're off the map," Harris said. "It does take a little effort to get to us but when you do you can see the magic."

A large part of that magic has to do with events in the past that helped shape the people of Pacolet. With one of the largest granite deposits in the southeast nearby and a rich heritage as a textile community, the people of Pacolet are proud of their past.

Part of that past involves the devastation that was the 1903 flood. Much along the Pacolet valley was swept away, but in the aftermath the residents and textile leaders decided not only to rebuild but to build better. This, Harris said, is one reason why the town boasts one of the finest collections of 250 Arts and Crafts structures in the state. She also said this resiliency is still present and informs the community's drive to redevelop and recover from the loss of the textile industry and the recent economic recession.

"After the flood of 1903 they decided not only to build back but to build back better," Harris said. "That's the spirit we're trying to capture in what we're doing now."

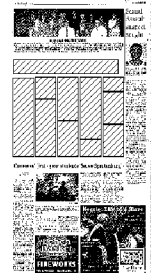
Pacolet's modern redevelopment efforts began with the creation of a grassroots movement to improve the community's quality of life in 1994. The resultant Pacolet Citizens Partnership group established five committees to develop goals and plans for community improvement. In 1997 the towns of Pacolet and Pacolet Mills merged, thus partially sealing a rift from the 1950s stemming from a water dispute that created the two towns and a third,

Central Pacolet.

Harris said the ongoing redevelopment process started with finding out what residents wanted for their community. In 2003 the S.C. Pilgrimage of Place project began out of a trip to County Mayo, Ireland, by Harris and a team from Clemson University's Institute for Economic and Community Development. The team saw the parallels between western Ireland and Pacolet and, returning home, developed the Pilgrimage of Place program with Pacolet chosen as the pilot community.

The following year in 2004 town adopted a master plan that envisions a revitalized riverfront that capitalizes on the area's single greatest natural feature and sees the community developing an economy based on heritage tourism. Harris explains that as a community with roots that actually go back thousands of years to Native Americans who mined soapstone nearby and used the river valley as a fertile hunting and trading ground, Pacolet has a heritage that includes far more than textiles.

Like other communities engaged in revitalization efforts, much of the work to this point in Pacolet has been improving infrastructure to support future growth. Harris said that of the roughly \$10 million in grant funding the community has received in the past decade, most of the money has gone to putting the bones in place to support what comes next.



Harris is quick to point out that what is happening in her community is the result of that community working together. She said such vital partners as Pacolet Milliken Enterprises, the land development firm founded by textile magnate Roger Milliken, and its subsidiary, Lockhart Power, have enabled Pacolet to move forward with its vision for the future.

Harris also said that thanks to the legacy of such accomplished Pacolet natives as Judge Bruce

Littlejohn, a former speaker of the state House of Representatives and Chief Justice of the South Carolina Supreme Court, she and other leaders feel an obligation to carry on and build on the legacy of such mentors.

"Never give up - that's Pacolet," Harris said. "If we hit a roadblock we look for ways around it."

With a comprehensive vision of where it's going, Pacolet is poised to become a destination community where outdoor

activities like rafting and tours of nearby historical sites draw visitors. Harris said the big challenge now is finding the funding to make those dreams come to fruition. But in keeping with its tenacious past, the people of the area seem determined to make their vision take shape.

"We're not going to just survive - we're going to thrive," Harris said.

For more information about Pacolet, visit the town's website at www.townofpacolet.com.