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PHOTO PROVIDED

Fort Lawn Heart & Soul Committee members look over portion of the revitalization project's action plan.

Heart & Soul, blood, sweat and tears

Fort Lawn revitalization group celebrates 'The Process, the Plan and the Promise'

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The Fort Lawn Heart & Soul revitalization group celebrated their process and looked ahead to their Promise during a recent night of celebration and "Transition Event" at the Fort Lawn Community Center. Along the way, they thanked and

celebrated some of the people who made the journey possible.

The Fort Lawn Community with Heart & Soul project began back in 2017 when, according to the H&S event program, "a group of residents and interested parties met to discuss goals and recommend strategies for engaging residents. The Heart & Soul project was designed to have a

vibrant, engaged community that works together to enhance and revitalize the 29714 Zip Code area including the Town of Fort Lawn."

The H&S project has been guided by the Orton Family Foundation and locally, supported by the Arras Foundation (which was called the J.

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Marion Sims Foundation when the H&S project began). The revitalization project has been staged from the Fort Lawn Community Center and FLCC Executive Director Libby Sweatt-Lambert has been a part of the project since its inception.

Sweatt-Lambert spoke the words of welcome at the "Transition Event" recently, as the H&S project transitioned into their next phase of existence as the Orton Family Foundation grant came to a close.

"This is an important night for our entire zip code. We have been working on this Heart & Soul project for three years. It's been blood, sweat and tears making this happen, but we are absolutely excited about the things that are happening here. You will see things that have happened, things that are happening and things that will come. We are moving from one phase (of the program) to another," Sweatt-Lambert said.

She added the H&S group was grateful to many different groups that have pulled together with them.

"The Orton Family Foundation provided an incredible framework for us to work with. Then the J. Marion Sims (now the Arras Foundation) provided the dollars for us to make it happen. Unexpectedly, the Chester Development Association provided funding for our very own 29714 Economic Development Plan, which was dropped into the county plan. We were able to make our own decisions,"

Sweatt-Lambert said. The H&S project was one of the leading participants in the Economic Development Strategic Plan for Fort Lawn. The economic development plan is for the Fort Lawn zip code of 29714, the same area included in the Heart and Soul project.

Arras Foundation President and CEO Susan DeVenny brought greetings and congratulations.

"On behalf of the Arras Foundation I am here to say congratulations...looking at you here reminds me now of what we saw in you three years ago. When we learned about this process that helps small towns across America unlock hidden voices, we knew it was something we needed to be involved in...we encouraged the Orton Family Foundation to bring this wonderful framework into the Southeastern part of America, because where else do we know how to tell good stories than here in South Carolina? And it's in the stories that we learn what people value, what they care about, and how better we need to equip families and communities for family's futures.

"At the Arras Foundation, we believe in the power of every voice and every resident to shape their own future. And that's what we saw in this framework. So we brought the process to the South and we started looking around for those communities that were ready for this kind of work...I'm seeing a group of very dedicated community members who worked for nearly three years to bring these kinds of values forward, so that you are building a future for families, now and forever," DeVenny



PHOTOS BY BRIAN GARNER/THE N&R

Fort Lawn Community with Heart & Soul volunteers, partners, board members and supporters posed for a quick photo at the celebration of the H&S Revitalization Project's transition to a committee working on their own Action Plan with projects for the next three to five years.

said.

"We are so proud of you – we see now why we selected you three years ago. You're so talented; we call you the scrappy engine of this region," she said.

H&S Committee member Sarah Stallings commented, "this has been a four-stage process that began in 2017 when a small group of us met to discuss what were the problems we've been having in this area, what people like, what they dislike and what would we have to do to see improvements? That's what we started going for – then we learned about the grant and wrote the grant for the Arras Foundation and the Orton Family Foundation, we

were approved, and immediately we started work. And I mean work. "Story gathering probably took longer than it should have, but we got 640 surveys completed. Our goal was 600, so we exceeded that. When we met with these individuals, we were trying to find out their story: why were they here? Why are they still here? What do they like? What do they dislike (about living here)? From that, we looked into what were some of the common elements we were hearing from these people, and we developed value statements...after that our team met and started to develop action plans. We wanted to see of the things that people wanted in this

area, what could we develop?" Stallings said. Stallings has accepted the chair of the Heart & Soul Stewardship Committee, which will continue the work done by the H&S project as they transition out of the Orton Family Foundation grant period.

Holly Furr has been the coach and guide for the H&S Committee as they worked their way through "the Process".

"It's been my pleasure to work with each and every one of you. I have said that I'll be a whole lot better coach the next time I do this because of you and the questions you've asked, and the fun times we have. I have learned so much from you," Furr told the H&S volunteers. The H&S process began, and then as they were getting their feet on the ground, they had to meet the challenge of a pandemic, Furr pointed out, and the way the group did meetings and training sessions changed. It was a challenge that the Heart & Soul committee rose to meet, Furr said. She thanked the volunteers for their willingness to work for the betterment of the community.

"It's heartwarming to see how much love and support each and every resident here and in Fort Lawn puts forth to make Fort Lawn the special place that it is," she said.

Fort Lawn Community Center Board VP Ronnie Currence said he looks forward to seeing the Heart & Soul committee becoming "activists" for their com-

munity.

Heart & Soul Coordinator Robin Currence thanked the volunteers, partners and community members who helped and participated in the H&S project along the way.

"You are an amazing group of people, because you have hung in there and brought forth things that nobody thought were going to be accomplished," she said. Currence will be leaving her post of Heart & Soul Coordinator to ramrod the FLCC project to prevent homelessness.

A visual presentation showed some of the accomplishments of the H&S project:

- Co-hosted yearly "back to school" events
- Hosted a weekly homework program
- Co-hosted Fort Lawn Fall Festivals
- Held community clean-up days
- Built picnic tables and landscaped town sign
- Facilitated and organized new partnerships between Fort Lawn and other organizations
- Assisted the Town of Fort Lawn with a PARD grant and Capital Projects Sales Tax applications
- Helped facilitate creation and implementation of economic development strategic plan for Fort Lawn zip code area
- Implementing an Action Plan with projects for the next 3 to 5 years

Check an upcoming issue of The N&R for a look at what the future holds for the Fort Lawn Heart & Soul program.



Exhibits of projects as well as some brainstorming lists were on display at the Heart & Soul celebration. Many of these suggestions and ideas have made their way into the Action Plan.