

Profile



Conway Rose

Conway Rose: Reinventing LaGrange

Conway Rose has a vision for LaGrange, North Carolina, a turn-of-the-century town of 3,500 that has been in decline for 30 years. He looks beyond neglected and abandoned buildings and sees a self-sustaining town that can restore its historic buildings - built between 1890 and 1915 - and create an environment that will be good for business and an appealing destination for visitors.

The Mom and Pop businesses of LaGrange have long since collapsed in the face of competition from the big chains. And 15 years ago the opening of Highway 70, which bypasses the town, seemed to seal its fate. Nearly all of the historic buildings on the main street of town stood vacant, padlocked and forgotten until Conway Rose entered the picture.

Rose is and has been many things in his life: historian, archaeologist, general contractor, restorer of historic structures, recreational pilot, nationally certified antiques appraiser, WWII Okinawa veteran, and the leading North Carolina authority on the Tuscarora Indians.

Here's one more: leader of the **LaGrange Redevelopment Foundation**, a Rebuild America

partnership dedicated to reviving this ailing southern town.

For Rebuild America partnerships like this one, saving energy can be a tool of economic revitalization. Since its inception in April 1997, the Foundation has been buying vintage buildings in the town's commercial district. Today, 13 of the 25 historic buildings in the commercial district are in the Foundation's possession.

By making cost-effective improvements to these historic buildings, Rose plans to attract quality business and retail tenants that in turn will draw visitors.

"We want LaGrange to serve as a small town America revitalization model that will help other communities in a similar situation," he said.

He has been resourceful in getting help wherever he can find it. A grant from the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources helped in the purchase of the

Foundation's first buildings. His plans further crystallized with assistance from Rebuild America.

The Foundation has used most of a \$100,000 state grant in coordination with Rebuild America to restore or replace the roofs of 11 historic buildings.

New Parks, Renewed Hope

As the plan to redevelop LaGrange evolves, the Foundation will be in a position to bring new amenities to the town, such as recreation centers, parks and public gardens, Rose said.

On the front burner are plans for an outstanding regional museum in LaGrange. The Foundation has enlisted the help of architects and museum experts and has attracted some corporate sponsorship for the project.

Another pending victory for the town is that it has received a federal historic district designation grant for an area encompassing

50 houses, five churches and 23 downtown businesses that pre-date 1910.

Rose said his biggest challenge has been to get the full support of the town. "They'd been down and out for 30 years and had no confidence," he said.

He holds meetings regularly to keep residents apprised of the Foundation's plans and writes a weekly newspaper column about local history and architecture. Residents are beginning to see the difference the Foundation is making and have something they haven't had in many years: Hope for their town and their futures.

A licensed general contractor for 40 years, Conway Rose has served as president of both the Wayne County Historical Society and the North Carolina Archaeological Society. He resides in Goldsboro, NC, with his wife Lew. For more information, contact him at (252) 566-2400.