

Peale visit seen as boost for city

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Journal writer

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That Kankakee has attracted nationally renowned speakers to come here Friday is only the sign of things to come, according to Charles Betterton, executive director of the Kankakee Economic and Community Development Agency.

Friday's event, featuring Norman Vincent Peale and Les Brown, is the kickoff for the new Community Development Center in the old Piersol Building on North Schuyler Avenue. The center is scheduled to open later this month and will be the home of various community-based development programs, including:

- A volunteer clearinghouse, where people

and volunteer organizations, and people in need of volunteer services can come together;

- The community development resource library. Betterton said much of the material is very expensive, and as such, usually only available to organizations. Through the library, the

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information will be available to everyone in the community for the betterment of themselves and their organizations;

- Consulting services on how to use the material;

- Entrepreneurial training programs;
- The grantsmanship writing course scheduled for next month;

- The Kankakee Economic and Community Development Agency; and

■ Youth 2000.

Betterton also would like to have an enterprise incubator, where "graduates" of the entrepreneurial training can start businesses. It would provide a central location for various types of businesses and a shared clerical pool.

The purpose of the programs is to "empower" people through self-help methods to take control of their lives and the health of the community. Betterton says one of the biggest obstacles to the success of the area and its citizens is negativity. As an example, he points to comments he's heard that Peale isn't really coming to Kankakee; the Paramount Theatre event is merely going to be a video.

"Live and in person, at the Paramount Theatre," Betterton could be heard to say whenever.

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or he saw someone within earshot.

Betterton said that remark — that someone as well-known as Peale would not come to Kankakee — substantiates his impression of the negativity here.

His opinion is backed by area psychiatrists, who say the most prevalent illnesses treated here are negativity and depression, and the Fantus Study, conducted about three years ago to define the area's development needs. The Kankakee County Economic Development Council came about from that study.

Simplified, Betterton says the mission of the city's Economic and Community Development Agency, and the programs that will be held at the new center, is to address the negative findings of that study.

Among the major objectives Betterton hopes to meet through the community-based development programs are:

- Achieving a workable community consensus and involvement in key economic development matters.

- Creating an effective public-private partnership.

- Networking and cooperation with other key Illinois Development Organizations.

- Develop a small-business assistance program.

- Investigate public/private programs to raise graduation achievement at the public schools.

Some of these objectives will be met in conjunction with other community organizations. Other goals targeted in the study have been addressed by the county's EDC, Kankakee Community College, and the cooperative Metro Sewer project.

With solid plans for addressing those goals, Betterton says the negativity, as bad as it sounds, can be conquered. It is exactly why Peale and Brown have been asked to speak here; all is not lost.

There are some leaders who view

the turnout at this one event as the showdown for the development programs, however. Bill Lucek, chair of the Kankakee Area Chamber of Commerce, said Friday's "Community Unity Celebration," as it's being called, needs to be successful to set the tone for programs about to sprout at the center.

He is joined by Kankakee County Board Chairman Marwood Hendrix when he says Betterton needs the success. While both men list themselves among the supporters of Betterton and the community-based development plans, Betterton has his share of detractors.

Another local leader, however, isn't looking at Friday as High Noon.

The Rev. William Copeland, pastor of Morningstar Baptist Church in Kankakee, is impressed that among the sponsors secured for Friday's event are organizations that traditionally do not work together: the Greater Kankakee Ministerial Association and the North-Side Ministerial Alliance; the Bradley-Bourbonnais Chamber of Commerce and the Kankakee Area Chamber of Commerce; and Riverside Medical Center and ServantCor, the parent of St. Mary's Hospital.

"That's never happened before, at least since I've been in this city," Copeland said. "That in itself is a step forward."

And as for the celebration needing to be a success, Copeland had a different perspective.

"I'm of the opinion that a project or a person is not a failure until they stop trying. As long as you keep trying, you will ultimately accomplish."

"I'm still optimistic about it, of course, but it's a lot closer now than it was two years ago," the minister said.

Perhaps the reason behind some thoughts that Peale must draw a huge crowd is that the community development programs are only beginning to come to fruition, after two years on the drawing board.

The driving force behind the new center and all that will be housed there has been Betterton.