

Orange partnership to mark its 5th year

By CAROL LAURIAT
Recorder Staff

ORANGE — The Orange Revitalization Partnership will celebrate its fifth anniversary Tuesday with a party at the former Orange Arts Center on South Main Street.

The grass-roots organization started with 20 residents committed to re-invigorating the downtown. Over the years, the goal has expanded to become a comprehensive economic development plan.

"When we talk about our accomplishments, I always insist that one of our most important is the building of an organization that represents many different interests and constituencies in town, and has kept a board of 20 people and over 200 volunteers actively involved in the development of their community for no other reason than they care about it," said partnership Director Deborah Becker. "In this day and age of busy people with too many things to do, that is significant."

Board President Manuel King said that when the organization wrote down all of its accomplishments, the list was 2½ pages long.

Among the projects:

- ◆ The rehabilitation of Memorial Park in the center of town.
- ◆ Technical assistance to 78 new or existing businesses that created 41 jobs.
- ◆ Loans to rehabilitate older downtown commercial buildings.

Among the buildings was the former Central School, which had been vacant for 10 years. Now, several educational groups use the building, including Greenfield Community College for satellite classes.

"There is also some sadness for us as we celebrate our birthday," King said last month. "Our founding director, (Becker), will be leaving the organization at the end of September. We are very grateful to her for the support and energy she has given us. When she was hired by the town (using state grant money), there was no partnership, and most people were telling her that it could never happen, that Orange could never change. But she believed it could, and pretty soon, we started believing it, too."

Projects that have helped build community support include: the Citizen of the Month award, which honors a resident who volunteers to help the community; a farmers market; Hello Summer, which celebrates youth; and Starry, Starry Night, a free first-night celebration.

The community's youth, especially teens, have figured prominently in the partnership's work. In conjunction with the Community Coalition for Teens, there has been a teen center open three days a week.

Tim Cohen-Mitchell coordinates the Young Entrepreneur's Society, which helps train street-wise youth who have difficulty getting through traditional classes.

The group will soon start its third program. "Our first two classes involved eight kids each

and were more successful than I had expected," Cohen-Mitchell said. "The teens really leave the class with a new feeling of confidence about themselves and their ability to survive in the world of work and business."

Some ORP projects have been dropped, while others, like the Waterfront Park, are on hold. The highway barn on East River Street needs to be moved before a park can be developed. The plan is to have a new highway barn built by next year.

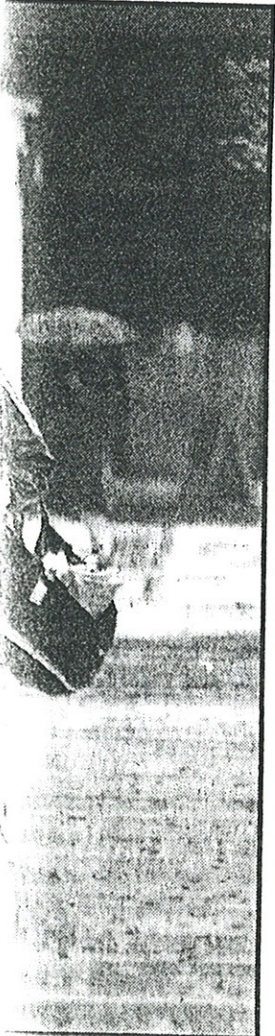
The Millers River Greenway Project has been changed from a bike trail along the river, to a bike path along Route 2A.

Greenway Chairman Anthony Palmieri said the project was "temporarily altered" so the town would not lose federal funding awarded three years ago.

King said, "It's hard to say good-bye to (Becker), but the board feels confident that we will continue to survive and grow as an organization, and that we will help the town of Orange unfold into the vision we share for it."

Becker said, "It's sad for me to be leaving ORP. There have been some difficult times in the past six years, as there are in any community. But what I remember most are the warmth, commitment and genuine kindness of so many of the people in Orange. I will miss them all."

Tickets for Tuesday's event are \$10 and, due to limited space, must be reserved in advance. Reservations can be made by calling the partnership's office at (978) 544-2845.



Recorder/Peter MacDonald

Get More Than a Test Score
Get Back Your Life

- FREE of charge
- Written Self-Test for Depression
- Educational Presentation