

# City looks at 'cultural tourism'

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MUSKEGON HEIGHTS -- Muskegon Heights has a rich history in music, art and fashion, and city leaders want to share that culture with the rest of the region.

They say promoting their deep African-American culture through small businesses and art attractions is key to redeveloping the downtown.

So city leaders are bringing in a state expert on marketing to show them how. Betty Boone, Michigan's director of cultural economic development, will meet with the city council at 4 p.m. Aug. 18.

"We have a culture here that can attract people -- music, art, fashion," said Muskegon Heights Vice Mayor Dorothy Scott. "We want to have a community that can attract people from Grand Haven, Spring Lake and Chicago."

Boone will work with Heights officials to identify funding sources for their ideas, said Reatha Anderson, the city's director of planning and community development. The concept of marketing a community's culture is called "cultural tourism."

"She will be able to give council a sense of what cultural tourism is and what's needed (to accomplish the effort)," Anderson said.

The idea of "cultural tourism" surfaced last year while the council and the city's Downtown Development Authority came up with a "blueprint" that broadly outlined goals and strategies to redevelop the downtown.

The cornerstone of the city's downtown redevelopment plan is the old Strand building, which has sat vacant for many years at 22 E. Broadway. The 1920s-era theater building has fallen into disrepair over the years and is now owned by the city.

In recent years, the city has considered several options, including razing the building or selling the property to a private developer. The council earlier this year decided to maintain ownership and try to save the building. During the past year, the city has fixed the building's dilapidated roof.

City officials eventually would like to see the state designate the Strand as a historical building. That designation would allow the city to create a nonprofit organization that would oversee the theater's operations.

Officials have said they would like to see a refurbished Strand house a variety of retail shops, commercial offices and residential apartments.

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