

Thread City group garners \$14.5K in aid

By **LOUISA OWEN SONSTROEM**
Chronicle Staff Writer

WILLIMANTIC — Furthering development efforts downtown will be the aim of \$14,500 recently awarded to Thread City Development Inc.

Thread City Development's grant was the largest of all Preservation of Place grants awarded to seven Connecticut communities this year by the Connecticut Main Street Center, a downtown revitalization and economic development non-profit. "They received \$14,500 to be used for capacity-building for the organization," said CMSC Communications Manager Christine Schilke.

According to Schilke, the money will help with consulting assistance to develop priorities and a strategy for Thread City Development, which is a local group working to enhance Willimantic's downtown.

"They're trying to grow into a more mature, sustainable organization," Schilke said.

Jean de Smet of Thread City Development said the grant would be used to hire a consulting firm that would help the group to form "a comprehensive Main Street action plan."

"It's good news for the whole town," de Smet said, "in the sense that when Thread

City finishes these internal improvements, we should be able to be even more effective than we are now."

Town officials were pleased to hear the good news.

"It's great that they applied and it's even better that it was granted," said Windham Town Manager Neal Beets.

Windham Mayor Ernest Eldridge, too, expressed gladness.

"It sounds fantastic," he said.

Eldridge said downtown benefits from the efforts of groups such as Thread City Development.

"There's quite a few groups that are working for the betterment of the town," he said and, in the case of Thread City Development, "they've found themselves a good group of individuals who want to work hard to make downtown work."

A couple of years ago, the organization received a \$12,500 Preservation of Place grant, which it used along with other resources to develop a downtown web site, www.willimanticdowntown.org.

"(The web site) is beautiful, and I think really been helpful in engaging people around the community," Schilke said.

This year, she explained, the CMSC received a record number of applications for the Preservation of Place grant funds.

Seven applicants were selected by a three-member jury to receive a total of \$70,000.

"We were the highest grant recipient, which is exciting," de Smet said.

In addition to Willimantic, other communities receiving funds are Bridgeport, Canton, Essex, New London, Norwalk and the northwest corner.

"Historic preservation and the revitalization of our main streets create jobs, bring vacant buildings back on the tax rolls and add value and vitality to adjacent buildings and neighborhoods," explained CMSC President/CEO John Simone in a statement. "This year's winners are taking steps to implement these types of positive changes by proactively planning for the growth and improvement of their downtowns."

The CMSC's Preservation of Place grant program has been giving thousands of dollars to Connecticut communities since 2008.

The CMSC operates with support from the state Department of Economic and Community Development, Connecticut Light & Power Co. and others.

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