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< [Back to Regular Story Page](#)

A new old look for Puyallup?

Group hopes to restore downtown storefronts

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Downtown Puyallup's buildings don't look like they did when they were built 80 or 90 years ago. But one local improvement group thinks they should, and could, within the next few years.

The Puyallup Main Street Association is bringing together building owners and architecture students to restore several of historic building facades.

Five owners in the downtown area have expressed interest in having students from the University of Washington develop plans for restorations of their storefronts. The Main Street Association wants to provide them with matching grants to make the plans a reality.

"Unfortunately, these really great buildings that have been built in the teens and '20s have had a lot done to them over the years," said Dave Eatwell, the Main Street executive director. "Our goal is to take Puyallup back to that feel and ambience it had then."

The students will spend the next few months developing plans to remodel the building fronts, then present their ideas to owners in March.

Though Eatwell said the facade restorations could play an important role in downtown Puyallup's economic development, public funds aren't guaranteed.

Pierce County and the city each contributed \$5,000 to the planning stage, but haven't set aside money for implementing the program in their 2008 budgets.

City officials said they must be wary about giving money to facade improvement projects because the move could be seen as supporting one business over another.

"We saw that was beneficial to landowners and business owners to have a guideline and some designs to choose from," said city spokeswoman Glenda Carino. "But it's not under the city's purview to go in and tell them, 'you need to fix the front of your building.' It's something they need to take on themselves."

The Main Street Association will go back to the city and the county to seek grant money after the students have finished drafting plans, but Eatwell said much of the money might come from private donors and businesses.

Jim Nicholls, the UW architecture professor leading the design project, said getting a design in place is the first step to securing money.

During the past five years, students in his "Storefront Studio" program have worked on restoring facades in Seattle, Auburn and Renton, and are pursuing projects in Des Moines and Kent.

The students use computer models to show owners what their buildings could look like. Often the students consult archive photos to see how buildings appeared during their prime.

"A lot of times things have been covered up or boarded over, and can be easily brought back," Nicholls said. "This is about really trying to understand what the historic character was that we can bring back to the surface. It's about bringing back what was there instead of inventing some new look."

Puyallup building owners who are participating said they're interested in seeing what ideas the students come up with and whether grant money is available.

Facade improvements can be as inexpensive as a few thousand dollars for a paint job or tens of thousands of dollars for a larger overhaul, Eatwell said.

That's no small investment for building owners to make on their own, said Roy Taylor, who owns the building that houses the Puyallup Carpet Center at 115 S. Meridian.

"By the time you pay an architect to draw up the plans, and look into contractors to do the construction work and everything else, it's not that easy," Taylor said, adding that he'd like to see the original transom windows restored on his building.

"If they could come up with a plan that would not take a lot of money out of my pocket or anything, I'd be all for it."

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proposed renovation sites

These Puyallup businesses might get a new look if the building owners move forward with facade improvements. The owners are letting UW architecture students come up with ideas.

Dog Daze, 116 S. Meridian

Puyallup Custom Framing and Art, 118 S. Meridian

Studio 210 and the Coffee Bar, 208 S. Meridian

The Puyallup Carpet Center, 115 S. Meridian

The Two J's Tavern, 215 N. Meridian

Lee's Martial Arts, 115 W. Meeker

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