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Urban design expert speaks in Allentown Saving Valley's historic buildings is about saving region's soul, he tells audience.

By Sarah Fulton
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The Lehigh Valley can grow without residents losing what they love and local officials can guide sustainable development for the future, a nationally recognized speaker told an audience at Allentown's Symphony Hall on Thursday.

Ed McMahan, an authority on land conservation, urban design and sustainable development from Urban Land Institute, gave a free, two-hour public presentation about the keys to strengthening the region, such as focusing on the unique characteristics of each city and town and to preserve natural resources and open space in the townships.

McMahan, an Alabama native who now resides outside Washington, D.C., spoke energetically, quoting from Mark Twain to Margaret Mead. He said the key to creating a sustainable community is in the hands of the people and local leaders.

"The apple rots from the inside out," McMahan said. "If you don't have a healthy downtown, you don't have a healthy town."

Community image is critical to economic vitality, McMahan said. People visit places because of what they look like, such as the Victorian borough of Jim Thorpe.

"If every place was just like every place there'd be no reason to go anyplace," McMahan said.

Communities should work to preserve historic buildings, neighborhoods and landscapes. He said that compromising to accept a casino in Bethlehem in order to save the Bethlehem Steel blast furnace, which he called an "industrial icon," was wise because it preserves the city's character.

"Saving the historic buildings of the Lehigh Valley is about saving the soul of the Lehigh Valley," McMahan said.

McMahan said regional development is not the problem, the pattern of development is. He criticized the practice of creating wide suburban streets lacking trees or walkable proximity to town centers.

He said construction should enhance community character. Chains such as fast food restaurants or big-box retailers can be prompted to conform their buildings to the style of the region. McMahan showed photos of McDonald's stores that adapted to local architectural standards. One in the southeast looks like a classic Georgian-style home and one in the southwest looks like an adobe.

"Sameness is not a plus," McMahan said. "If you accept off-the-shelf, cookie cutter architecture, you'll get it every time."

McMahan said the secrets to successful communities are developing a vision for the future,

cataloguing assets, such as historic buildings and natural resources, being choosy with development proposals, and cooperating with neighboring municipalities.

Dale Freudenberger of the Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor said government officials and planners should read McMahon's material.

"We're all working on the same page," Freudenberger said. "It's what's needed here in Pennsylvania to grow smartly."

McMahon is continuing his presentation today at DeSales University as part of a workshop with area government leaders and planners.

Sarah Fulton is a freelance writer.
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