

# Spring, streetscape patiently awaited

3/1/2010 3:31 AM

Don't let the snow outside depress you too much because spring begins in 20 days.

And for the folks who work on High Street in Waynesburg, spring has a special significance this year - the beginning of the long-awaited streetscape project for the borough's downtown.

Now, those who have been laboring to get this project off the drawing board for five years have been saying this beautification enterprise is expected to begin in "early spring."

Well, to us that means construction could begin anytime between March 20 and Memorial Day. And of course the start date will depend on when this snow finally melts.

This project has been plagued by delays since the concept was first discussed in 2005.

Borough officials learned early in 2010 that it would not be able to use the federal grant money to bury utility lines, which is a key part of the project.

Two of the utility companies, Comcast Communications and Allegheny Power, have agreed to bury the lines for free, but Windstream Communications will charge \$52,000 to bury its telephone lines.

Basically, what this undertaking includes is revamping the sidewalks on three blocks of High Street, from Cumberland to Washington streets, and two blocks on Washington Street, from High to Wayne streets.

The project will feature decorative sidewalks, new streetlights and tree-lined streets.

This is not a major revitalization project, and we have been confounded at times by what it has taken to get this moving forward.

Consider: In 2006, at Waynesburg Prosperous & Beautiful's fifth annual garden party, Connie Burd, the organization's executive director at the time, said, "By next summer, you will see construction right here on High Street."

We all know that didn't happen, and we also know that bureaucratic delays are often unavoidable, but we still can't get it out of our heads that there are those who wish this project would just go away.

We thought the time was just right back in 2006 and 2007 before the Walmart project on Route 21 in Franklin Township was completed.

History has shown when Walmart moves in, the nearest "downtown" takes a retail hit, and that did not escape the attention of the Waynesburg Prosperous & Beautiful people.

But as we know, Walmart is up and running and not one shovel of dirt for the streetscape project has been turned.

So much for Waynesburg's merchandising pre-emptive strike.

And we cannot help but draw a comparison to Washington's Bassettown enterprise in the late 1970s.

It came a decade after two malls sprang up, capturing the majority of the retail business that had been the domain of Main Street, Washington.

There were wide sidewalks, shade trees and new facades, but those improvements could never compete with the free parking and the name chain stores at the shopping malls. The street was pretty, but shoppers were still few.

We don't doubt the downtown will become more attractive once the streetscape project is complete, nor do we want to discount the effort put in by those who have worked so hard to make this vision a reality.

But we are just as realistic the project will not turn the downtown into a shopping mecca.

The attitude now, we fear, is the community will take what it can get, assuming this snow eventually melts.

Copyright Observer Publishing Co.