

Toano historic district nomination moves forward



The 7800 block of Richmond Road in Toano is seen Aug. 29, 2018. Jack Wray owns several properties in Toano and hopes to create a walkable mixed-use district in the town. This building, which Wray wants to turn into a restaurant, is within the proposed historic district. (Jonathon Gruenke/Staff)

By **Jack Jacobs**

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A bid to re-energize Toano took a step forward Thursday, when the nomination to add the Toano Commercial Historic District to the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places was approved on the state level.

The Board of Historic Resources and the State Review Board both voted unanimously to approve the nomination during a joint meeting in Richmond. The designation would make tax credits available to property owners within the district who wish to improve their properties, so long as those improvements adhere to historic guidelines. The vote follows a public hearing held in Toano last month, where the idea was well received by area residents.

With its state-level approval in hand, the application now goes to the National Park Service, which is expected to render final approval to establish the district early next year, Jack Wray said. Wray, along with his brother, is a Toano native leading an effort to revitalize Toano.

“We’ve worked so hard to make this happen,” Wray said after the vote. “What that’s going to bring to Toano has yet to be seen but I’m so excited by the possibilities.”

The district would consist of 11 properties on the north side of Richmond Road in Toano. The earliest historic buildings that are within the district date back to 1903, said Marc Wagner of the Department of Historic Resources.

“It’s an early 20th century district focused on commercial buildings that compromised the commercial core of the unincorporated Toano village,” Wagner said.

The 4.1-acre district wouldn’t restrict what owners could do to their property in the district. Owners would still be able to paint buildings or tear them down according to their desires, though projects that aren’t historically appropriate wouldn’t get tax credits.

The effort to secure the designation comes as part of a revitalization project for the town led by the Wrays. Around the turn of the 20th century, the town was a center of commerce. However, a project that widened Route 60 demolished main-street buildings and shops on the south side of Richmond Road in the 1960s, and took much of the town’s energy with it.

The district would include a building owned by Wray that he wants to convert into a restaurant. Wray hopes the tax credits would encourage owners to consider improvements in such a way that’s true to the Toano’s historical roots.

Wray also wants to establish a small commercial development, which would be called Toano Station, across the street. The vision is for a development with apartments above commercial spaces, which could be the site of coffee shops, small grocery stores, breweries and the like to create a new commercial and social hub for the town.

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