



Photo courtesy of Pham Chopra, Servant of Elkton

"Chopra came to town, stayed 45 days, spent \$6 million and bought 51-52 percent of the town's commercial property." To some, that fact raises concerns, red flags, thoughts of one man trying to take over.

Visions of Pham Chopra

written by CAROL J. ALEXANDER

One of the first communities in the Elk Run Valley of eastern Rockingham County grew around George Conrad's store. Conrad, son of Captain Stephen Conrad of the American Revolution, built his general store in 1812. In 1816, it became a United States Post Office with Conrad as its postmaster. During the Civil War, it served as a recruiting station for the Confederacy. According to Casey Billhimer, president of the Elkton Historical Society, when the

Shenandoah Valley Railroad opened its new passenger station at Conrad's Store, the name of the community became Elkton Station. That was in 1881. The town officially incorporated as Elkton on March 14, 1908.

Over 100 years later, Elkton is the home to almost 3,000 people in 1.4 square miles. And to those 3,000 people, the Main Street matters.

Which thoroughfare is the Main Street of Elkton, though, is unclear. The business

ELKTON

Straddling the South Fork of the Shenandoah River and lying literally in the shadow of the Blue Ridge, the Shenandoah Valley town of Elkton, Virginia is an uncommonly beautiful part of the country.



Aerial photo of Elkton, Virginia courtesy of Greg Cromer <http://www.gregcromer.com/>

district is scattered along West Spotswood Avenue, West Rockingham Street and West Spotswood Trail. The businesses in that area include the typical hardware store, banks, fast food and auto repair. But in the mix of typical, the visitor will find a few jewels.

"We've weathered a lot and we're still here," said Barb Polin, owner of Solace Studios. Solace is an artists' cooperative where shoppers will find home décor, fashion accessories and unique gifts. Celebrating her 15th year in business in Elkton, Polin believes that if new businesses would follow her example, they too could succeed. "It's all about the marketing," she said. "Because I let people know I'm here, they come from all over the state."

Another key to success, according to Polin, is to offer something others don't have. Todd Townsend, co-owner of McGuire's Country Store with his wife Crystal, agreed. "We wanted to open an antique store," he said, "but added home décor, candles and

other things to draw people to come and look."

McGuire's, located in the same location as the original McGuire's Grocery Store (circa 1922), has a mix of antiques and primitives that makes visitors feel as though they've stepped back in time.

"We went into other shops and looked at their mixture of items. We started by opening part-time and then opened longer as the business grew," he said. That was five years ago. Other secrets to their success include, "Start small and don't get in over your head. Keep your overhead low."

Between Polin and Townsend, any person contemplating opening a small business in Elkton would have plenty of mentoring. Both are eager to see others succeed—no matter what the business.

"Having more of the same type of shop is not necessarily a bad thing," Townsend said. Folks will go shopping where there are options, and where there is enough to



Originally named Conrad Store, Elkton became an incorporated town in Rockingham county in 1908.



The Leap House before restoration



Theatre



The Leap House after restoration



Elkton is home to the second oldest tree in the state of Virginia. Photo by 621 Studios

keep them busy for the day. Think shopping and lunch. The town is eager to see others succeed, as well. According to Kevin Whitfield, Elkton town manager, Elkton recently hired a new grant and special events coordinator. Allison Morris is now the first line of communication with businesses and organizations when it comes to nurturing and growing the town's Main Street.

One of her primary duties is to oversee special events like Elkton's annual Heritage Festival held every October, their Halloween HooDoo, and the Christmas Parade and Bazaar. These events are hosted by the Elkton Downtown Revitalization Corporation and the Elkton Progressive Improvement Committee.

The town is known for closing the downtown area to traffic during special events. This move ensures the safety of pedestrians, gets folks out of their cars and moving in and out of the businesses, and "makes for a fun time," said Whitfield. During the Halloween HooDoo, children are invited into this safe zone for trick-or-treating. At Christmas, the town sponsors a storefront decorating contest and carriage rides.

According to Whitfield, all of these events help to nurture the downtown businesses. Townsend agreed. "Elkton Autumn Days is the second biggest weekend of the year," he said.

"And more events throughout the year would benefit greatly, especially to draw people to the community."

Morris is on that. Hired just the first of February, she has already partnered with the Friends of Elk Run Trails to sponsor several events. The first, St. Patty's JK Sprint Roadie was held last month. Scheduled for July 2, the Fireball Dash and Splash will include a one-mile run and a one-mile swim. The race will end at the boat landing with food, music and more.

"I have a 12-month calendar full of events," she said.

Elkton's History

Nurturing the downtown businesses is not the only reason Main Street Matters in Elkton. "This town has a lot of history," said Polin. "The second oldest tree in the state is in front of the town office." Sure enough, a bur oak, over 300 years old and the largest of its kind on the east coast, drops acorns the size of golf balls on the front lawn of Elkton's municipal offices. Interestingly, those offices are located in a building rich with history.

The Jennings House is an eight-room brick structure built in 1840 for Dr. Simeon Jennings. Following the Battle of Cross Keys and Fort Republic (June 1862), Dr. Jennings and his wife cared for the wounded Confederate soldiers in their home. A few blocks away, on East Rockingham Street, the Miller-Kite house was used by Stonewall Jackson as he laid plans for his famous Valley Campaign in April 1862. Owned by the town since 1984, the Miller-Kite house is now home to the Elkton Historical Society and a Civil War museum. It is registered as a Virginia and National Historic Landmark.

Other Elkton locations are also listed on the National Register of Historic Places. They include the Kite Mansion and Bon



The Jennings House, now home to the Elkton municipal offices, was used as a Confederate Hospital during the 1862 and 1864 Valley Campaigns. Photo by 621Studios



The historic Elkton Theatre after restoration at night. Photo by Gabriel Alexander. Photo by Gabriel Alexander



Elkton United Methodist Church. Photo courtesy of Joshua Gooden

Main Street Matters | ELKTON

Air.

Bon Air, also known as the Adam and Susan Bear house, was built in 1870 outside of the town limits next to Bear Lithia Springs. The springs were acquired by the Bear family during the 1700s and home to Bear Lithia Bottled Water in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Kite Mansion was built in 1948 for area pharmacist William Edgar Kite. Kite owned The Elkton Pharmacy from the 1920s until the early 1960s. According to Billhimer, after Kite passed away his daughter Mary Elizabeth continued to live in the home until she moved to Sunnyside Retirement Community in 2000. It has remained empty since.

Introducing Pham Chopra

The town of Elkton purchased the Kite Mansion, along with 68 surrounding acres in 2002. They used the property for special events. Then in 2015, they sold the property with additional acreage to Pham Chopra, CEO of CORDEV, Inc, an IT and telecommunication defense contractor based in Falls Church; founder of Akal Institute, a non-profit organization devoted to the treatment of alcoholism and drug addiction; a licensed real estate broker and a Class-A building contractor.

What does Chopra intend to do with the Kite Mansion? "A lot of ideas have been talked about," said J.W. Gordon, Elkton resident and one of Chopra's assistants. "The most talked about idea is a high end restaurant." But opening a restaurant is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Chopra's plans for Elkton.

Pham Chopra met his soulmate, June, over 40 years ago. A descendent of a pioneer family who settled in Swift Run Gap, she brought Chopra to Elkton in 1976 to meet her family—who had relocated to Elkton after being displaced at the creation of Shenandoah National Park. After their marriage, Chopra, who holds several degrees from the University of Michigan, became an active member of the Elkton community.

"In October," said Whitfield, "Chopra came to town, stayed 45 days, spent \$6 million and bought 51-52 percent of the town's commercial property."

To some, that fact raises concerns, red flags and thoughts of one man trying to take over.

Yet others ask, "Why was 52 percent of the town's commercial property available for sale?" Obviously, Elkton has not been thriving. "We missed the opportunity to have children," Chopra said, "so we adopted the town."

Historical Restoration

Marks of his ownership can already be seen. One property, the Leap House on West Rockingham Street, has gone from ugly frog to handsome prince. Crews completed



As "a Sikh," said Chopra, "I am a disciple of understand Him." It is through the practice of received the vision to bring life back to Elkton. need for recognition or any return."



Entrance of Kite House

ELKTON FAMILY DENTISTRY

Welcoming New Patients

Jon M. Trabosh, DDS
Janice L. Usnick, DMD
Craig W. Flaherty, DDS

540-298-1581
160 W. Spotswood Ave
Elkton, Virginia

www.elktonfamilydentistry.com



Semper Fi Computers

Repairs & Sales
(new and used)
Installations

406 West Spotswood Trail
Suite C
Elkton, VA 22827
540-560-3443

phantomjet@yahoo.com
www.semperficomputers.com





Aerial view of Elkton (photo by Greg Cromer) <http://www.gregcromer.com/>

*truth, acknowledging one universal creator, God, as I
his faith, and daily prayer and meditation, that Chopra has
"My principle duty is service to all," he said. "Without any*



Inside Solace

Solace studios
BRINGING COLOR TO LIFE

Handcrafted is always in style

Virginia Artisans • Fine Handcrafts • Unique Gifts

540-298-5222 • www.solaceinc.com
193 W. Spotswood Ave., Elkton, VA 22827

the exterior restoration of the historic Elkton Theatre in January and continue work on the interior.

"Roth Theatres opened the Elkton Theatre in 1949," said Billhimer. It was open through the 1960s, closed for a season, then re-opened from 1969 until 1980. Operating primarily as a cinema, the theatre also hosted live shows starring Tex Ritter, Gene Autry, Patsy Cline, and others. "It had the largest screen in the state at that time," said Billhimer.

Chopra plans to open the theatre for live concerts, gospel and bluegrass music jams, and ballet performances. "He'd also like to make it available to the local schools for their programs," said Gordon, "to get the community involved."

The town has an amazing community center with senior activities, youth sports, dance classes, travel opportunities and more. But for evening entertainment, residents look forward to the Elkton Theatre. "I'm tickled to death about it being re-opened," said Billhimer.

Conrad's Store is also on Chopra's restoration agenda. According to Gordon, a special task force overseeing this project is meeting with historical experts to make sure that the restoration is accurate.

"We are in the process of having these assets (the theatre and Conrad's Store) recognized on the Historic Register," Chopra said. "In fact, the entire town is being considered for that distinction."

Once completed, Conrad's Store will house a museum.

Akal Institute

Akal Institute is the impetus behind all these revitalization projects. Chopra describes himself as a recovered alcoholic, "clean and sober since 1975." Consequently, he founded Akal in 1988 to help others addicted to drugs and alcohol. Frequently talked about is Akal's long-term goal to establish a transitional living facility for recovering professional athletes and veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

"But the town is first," he said. "There are no plans, nor do I foresee any, to have a transitional living facility within the town as is, at present. ... We need to get our existing house in order, uncover the jewels—Conrad's Store, the theatre—restore the town to what it was 45 years ago and restore a semblance of our past, before we consider other projects."

"He [Chopra] has bought properties in disrepair or condemned and brought them back to life," said Whitfield. "The town looks forward to working hand-in-hand with him."

Supporting the Town's Infrastructure

The revitalization projects include more than restoring historical buildings, however. Supporting the town's infrastructure and creating a greenway are also in the works.

"We have also established a task force to help the town qualify for a grant to address the challenges we face with the sewage treatment facility and our water system," Chopra said. Morris said she has not yet met or spoken with Chopra, but acknowledged that she is working on writing four grants for water infrastructure and another for river bank improvements.


According to Gordon, head of the greenway task force, they hope to create a walking trail "like the one in Luray." The proposed trail will follow Elk Run from the south fork of the Shenandoah River, through the town's Main Street district, to the springs behind the Kite Mansion. He said the town hopes to build a new park along the river at the head of the proposed trail.



Gordon pointed out that someone tried to get the vision by creating a pocket park along the creek behind the Farmers and Merchants Bank. But it is not easily acces-



Elkton Gateway Kick-off Cruise-in in Downtown Elkton. Photo by Joshua Gooden.

LAND FOR SALE (4 acres)
Turner Ashby Schools/Convenient to RMH



Call 540-746-1962
email: cgregshields@gmail.com

sible, unless you want to park in the bank's parking lot and walk down a steep embankment to get there. The proposed greenway would solve that difficulty.

Representatives from both the town and Akal have met with the Community Development Assistance Center of Virginia Tech to seek funding for the project. Although the ball is rolling, Gordon is reluctant to give a completion date. "I'd like to see how much funding we can secure, and then phase it out depending on the funding," he said.

The Vision

Akal is a term from the Sikh religion that means eternal.

"As a Sikh," said Chopra, "I am a disciple of truth, acknowledging one universal creator, God, as I understand Him." It was through the practice of his faith, and daily prayer and meditation, that Chopra received the vision to bring life back to Elkton. "My principle duty is service to all," he said. "Without any need for recognition or any return." But what do others think of Chopra's vision?

"I don't know him, or his plans," Townsend said, "but anything to improve the town is a benefit."

"I'm hopeful," said Polin. "I'm hopeful the effort he's putting into the restoration of properties will help propel the town forward economically."

Gordon said that some folks have a hard time seeing the vision. "They don't understand that he [Chopra] isn't in it for himself," he said.

Even Gordon's friends do not understand why he volunteers his time to this vision.

"We just want to help, we don't want credit," he said. "Someday my daughters will be walking through this town saying, 'My dad helped with that' and that is all the payment I need." *

Note: After the completion of this story, Shenandoah Living learned that Kevin Whitfield is no longer employed as Elkton's town manager. At this time, the position remains open.