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Originally Published: 6/14/2013

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Program profiles Reading redevelopment efforts

By **Bruce Posten**
Reading Eagle

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Efforts to revitalize Reading's economy were highlighted Thursday in a live national round-table online discussion that included panelists from California and Georgia.

"Albert Boscov is very good at shaking money trees, and I collect the bills," said Adam Mukerji, executive director of the Reading Redevelopment Authority, who sat in for the retailer Boscov, a key figure with Our City Reading, a group committed to helping first-time buyers purchase refurbished city homes.

Mukerji described the retailer "as one of the most charitable persons I have ever worked with."

Conversation Starters, a national nonprofit based in College Station, Texas, hosted the third in a series focusing on nationwide ideas for community building and economic development.

Previous round tables addressed coalition-building and the importance of considering the cultural contexts of residents in urban settings.

Ryan Melcher, Conversation Starters assistant director and a Berks County native, served as the program moderator.

"Our City Reading has transformed our community over the past 15 years and really helped to put Reading back on track," Melcher said. "I'm proud to provide an avenue for sharing that success story and hope to see it replicated in other communities."

Mukerji was joined on the panel by Marshela Salgado, vice president for communications of Reality Changers, and Steven Vasquez, founder of Cooking with Gabby, two California-based urban development organizations; and Bea Wray, executive director of Creative Coast, a Savannah, Ga.-based urban nonprofit.

Speakers compared their agencies' efforts to promote community development through education opportunities, business networking and health and fitness initiatives.

Mukerji pointed to Reading's success in transforming a former factory into the GoggleWorks, an arts and cultural center, attracting 1 million visitors since it opened in 2005.

In addition, he mentioned the quest for government grants to clean up a city Superfund factory site. That effort resulted in successfully attracting Sun Rich Fresh Foods Inc., a Canada-based fresh produce manufacturer which opened a city plant that employs 150 people.

"There are many challenges (for community development), including crime, lack of money, blight, poverty and the need for an educated workforce," Mukerji said.

He said the city has been vigilant in seeking government grants for urban improvement and in trying to identify grass-roots community leaders. He also explained the tax incentives used to attract private investment in Keystone Opportunity Zones.

The program will be posted online next week on Conversation Starter's website at growingtheconversation.org.

To learn more about the panelists and their programs, check www.realitychangers.org;

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Adam Mukerji

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