CARENCRO — The City Council has voted to create a committee to look into downtown planning as a first step toward making the city an official Main Street community.

"It is a lot of work, but nothing you can't do. And in the end, you are preserving your local community," said Jessica Golebiowski, a tax credit specialist with the state's Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism that oversees the Main Street program for the state.

By providing know-how and resources, the program — which is already active in 35 cities statewide — seeks to preserve what is best while helping to breathe new life into each community's historic center.

At the special called meeting held in cooperation with the Carencro Business Association on Wednesday, the council accepted the offer by Michael J. Lavergne, a grant writer and appraiser, to head the new committee to begin the planning process.

"We are a prime candidate for a program like this. We need a plan if we are going to build on what we have and improve it," Mayor Glenn L. Brasseaux said.

"I've got a lot of ideas," Lavergne said after the meeting. "There are so many grants available to help us."

During the meeting, Gaye Hamilton, cultural economy program manager with the DCRT, said the first step is creating a Louisiana Cultural District to allow local homeowners and businesses to receive grants, tax breaks and other incentives.

She said 51 communities have established cultural districts since the program began in 2005 and, on the whole, the results have been impressive.

She said these districts, which tend to focus on art and cultural activities, have led to $113 million in new investments and seen the number of vacant storefronts drop by 41 percent.

Hamilton said a focus on culture makes sense in Louisiana, where tourism is a major industry responsible for 148,000 jobs — second only to health care.

"It is based on the premise that our art, culture, food and music are our greatest natural resources," Hamilton said. "It is a really important aspect for our state and we can grow it."

Golebiowski said owners of historic homes in such a district can get up to a 25 percent tax credit for fixing up their properties and businesses can get up to a 50 percent credit when federal programs are added in.

"These districts can be of any size," Hamilton said. "Some of these are very large."

Jane Braud, director of New Iberia's Main Street program, said such programs have pumped more than $40 million into her community and led to an impressive rebirth of the downtown area that had fallen on hard times following the oil bust of the 1980s.

"The program has done a wonderful job for us," she said. "Having a cultural district has been a huge benefit to our downtown area. It is about a private and public partnership."

For more information or to volunteer, call Lavergne at 849-2863.