Restoring the past enhances the future.

In Springfield, that effort has a revitalized emphasis with the creation of the Historic Preservation Fund through the Community Foundation for the Land of Lincoln. The Community Foundation Historic Preservation Fund was sparked, in part, by a contribution from the Old State Capitol Foundation following the Old State Capitol rededication anniversary celebration in 2008. A more recent gift from the Heritage Foundation, which focuses on revitalizing historic buildings in the downtown Springfield area, helped grow the fund as well. These gifts, from organizations with a similar mission, create a new resource for those who care about historic preservation in our community.

The new fund was announced in May 2010 during a press conference in the Hall of Representatives at the Old State Capitol. Currently over $10,000 has been raised through this endowment.

“I thought it was a brilliant idea (to make a contribution),” said Carolyn Oxtoby of the Heritage Foundation. “They are fundraising and we are building-raising.”

“There isn’t a fund quite like this in the private sector,” said Paul O’Shea, who helped in the establishment of the Historic Preservation Fund. “It is difficult for government to always take care of the historic structures. For the most part government has done a nice job, but here I see more opportunities for the private, philanthropic sector to shape things.”

The Heritage Foundation has had excellent success in working with property owners to turn over the properties for tax relief to the foundation and then work to get the properties into the hands of those that want to preserve the structure. Five buildings have been preserved in this manner during the past five years.

“Seeing the great results they were achieving in acquiring properties and turning them over to individuals, we saw a common interest and a common goal for working to save historic buildings,” O’Shea said.

The city of Springfield has a natural tie with historic preservation. The Abraham Lincoln sites are the engine driving the tourism bus, but they aren’t alone as there are other historic structures like the Old State Capitol and Dana-Thomas House that add to the draw.

“The nature of Springfield is that the status of historical sites in our community has been a long part of the tourist industry,” said O’Shea, who has served as the City of Springfield’s Planning and Design Coordinator for the past four years. “If we can build upon that and preserve more buildings, we will see that part of our community grow.”

The Historic Preservation Fund will likely maintain a focus on structures in the older part of Springfield, including the downtown and surrounding neighborhoods. When the viability of a downtown area improves, residents and businesses are drawn there, helping to revitalize and energize a city’s core. The Heritage Foundation, which was established in the mid-1990s, has had success along Fifth, Sixth and Seventh streets in downtown Springfield, re-energizing those areas by preserving historic structures.

“It’s a slow process,” Oxtoby said. The Community Foundation expects that grants may be made from the fund sometime next year. Grant distributions will be overseen by a committee which includes Paul O’Shea, chair, Justin Blandford, Karen Conn, Bruce Ferry and Carolyn Oxtoby.