

Assembly sees 'Vision' as official downtown plan

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Published Friday, August 22, 2008

FAIRBANKS — Public officials agreed Thursday to adopt the Vision Fairbanks plan as their official course for developing downtown.

The urban revitalization plan aims to halt sprawl through “smart growth” planning principles.

The Fairbanks North Star Borough Assembly adopted Vision Fairbanks after hearing from supporters that the plan, which outlines key public infrastructure projects — including more on-street parking, wider sidewalks and a public square — would boost downtown’s character and economic draw.

Assembly member Randy Frank said he thought it will help make Fairbanks as unique as some communities he’s visited around the United States.

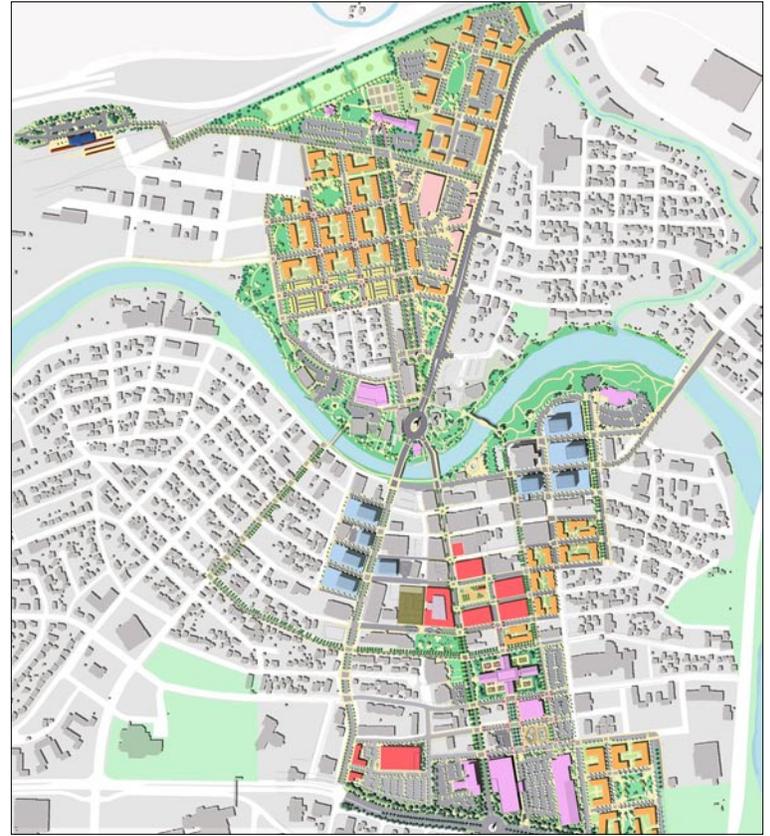
“I would like to see us stand apart as an individual city, too,” Frank said.

The assembly’s unanimous vote incorporates Vision Fairbanks into the larger Regional Comprehensive Plan, a guidebook for public policy. Borough lawbooks require public officials to follow the Comprehensive Plan when applying zoning rules and other ordinances. Vision Fairbanks is far more detailed, however, than other branches of the Comprehensive Plan, leading the assembly Thursday to deem it “flexible.”

Architect Janet Matheson told assembly members the plan will help preserve the historic character of Cushman Street, downtown’s major road. She said a group of professionals is drafting design guidelines for new buildings, guidelines she said will complement Vision Fairbanks. Bernardo Hernandez, the borough’s planning director, said it will help public officials make smarter decisions when spending dwindling federal transportation dollars.

The assembly’s vote directs future administrations to treat the plan’s prescriptive blueprint — a map for future stores, public centers and road corridors — as malleable. Luke Hopkins unsuccessfully proposed giving Vision Fairbanks tough legal teeth by requiring public officials to formally change the larger Comprehensive Plan before straying from Vision Fairbanks during routine zoning matters, a requirement borough Mayor Jim Whitaker warned would be unreasonably burdensome.

The assembly rejected Hopkins’ proposed change despite suggestions from supporters and professional planners that a firmer commitment could draw more private investment.



Vision Fairbanks Master Plan

The assembly’s vote ends an extended public process that followed a year-long drafting effort by urban planners.

At least one of Vision Fairbanks’ projects, a return to two-way streets, is already being prepared. Some of its proposals, including a call for moving the 2-year-old central bus stop and replacing it with a public square, have drawn questions.

The square, supporters say, would draw people to Cushman Street and make the surrounding business district more attractive to entrepreneurs. Vision Fairbanks calls for building a larger transit center a block to the west.

Carl Benson, a member of the borough’s advisory Transportation Commission, noted local officials worked for years to get federal funding for the center. He warned tearing it down so soon could reduce Fairbanks’ chances of getting money for a new one.

“Would such a request simply test the federal sense of humor?” he asked.

The plan’s final version omits a clause that, in earlier sketches, had looked to restrict big box store development on the city’s outskirts until commercial property along Cushman Street fills with stores. The clause had drawn objections from Fairbanks City Hall.