

# NewWest Missoula

## Public to Steer Missoula's Downtown Master Plan

By Dillon Tabish, 2-20-08

Thirty-five firms from across the country applied to work with the city of Missoula on the Downtown Master Plan, the first design strategy for the downtown in the city's history. After a long, hard look at each of the candidates, a steering committee chose the Portland-based firm **Crandall Arambula**.

The firm, according to Missoula Downtown Association director Linda McCarthy, stood out on one key issue: getting the general public involved. This made them a commonsense match for Missoula.

"Crandall Arambula talked so much about these community meetings and how the public is really who should be deciding what Missoula should look like 20 years down the road," McCarthy says.

George M. Crandall and Don Arambula, the firm's two principal design architects, have over 70 years of combined experience, primarily in the Northwest. The firm has won a number of awards in Oregon, including for riverfront planning, and in Wisconsin for downtown design and development.

Their resume looks good, but what can Missoulians expect throughout this long process and beyond?

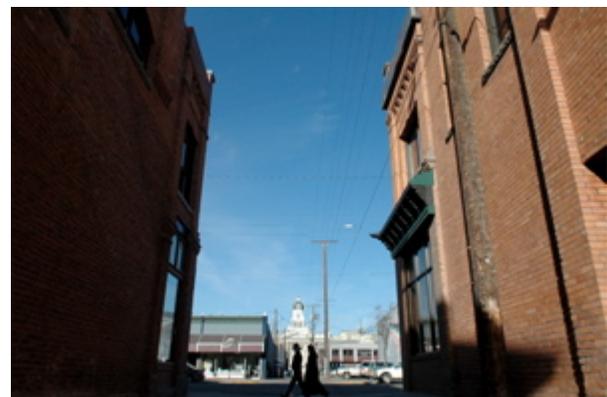
In the next 20 years, Missoula will increase by roughly 15,000 households, according to the Office of Planning and Grants. The Missoula Valley has about 38,500 households and roughly 89,000 people right now. That means by 2028, there may be about 123,000 people here.

"Communities cannot avoid change," Crandall told gatherers at the January 23rd Missoula Downtown Association dinner. The goal of a master planning process is "preventing undesirable change" and "encouraging desirable change."

Jason Graf has worked at Crandall Arambula since 2001 and is the project manager for the Missoula Master Plan. The first step in the process, he says, is getting to know a community—what it is, what it needs, and what it hopes to be. The first date, as Graf calls it, was the January 23 MDA dinner. The second date is set for March 5, when Graf and the team will lead a community workshop at the Holiday Inn.



Downtown Missoula. Photos by Emily Haas



Leading up to it, Crandall Arambula is doing preliminary research on the city, talking with business owners and city officials to get a general feel for the community. At the workshop a rough outline will be presented and participants, using response sheets and ballots, will give feedback.

“We look to get as much input as we can from the general public,” Graf says. The team will also ask residents fundamental questions about their community’s strengths and weaknesses, and to identify goals for the future.

Typically, according to Graf, the initial feedback is mixed, with dissenting voices most prominent. The plan can seem doomed from the start and people begin to lose confidence. But it’s the response sheets that more accurately gauge public opinion, and they provide the planners with necessary direction.

“Those multiple levels of interaction make for a successful plan and really show you what the pulse is,” Graf says. ...

In Crandall Arambula’s Power Point presentation shown to Santa Fe residents there is an emphasis on keeping new buildings and additions “in harmony with surrounding buildings in terms of architectural style, height, pedestrian scale and design at the street level.”

Racine, Wisconsin also hired Crandall Arambula. The downtown development plan involved two phases, and won numerous awards, including a “Recognition for Smart Growth Award” from the Sierra Club and a “Special Achievement Award” from the International Downtown Association.



“We’ve been very happy with it and we have continued to use it as our downtown plan and guide,” says Brian O’Connell, the director of City Development in Racine. “They also did design standards for us for new construction downtown and we continue to use that as well.”

While Crandall Arambula says public discussion is the best path to a good plan, there are a few generally-accepted recipes for success, including ground floor retail on both sides of the street, a high-quality pedestrian environment, attractive building presentation, and continuous and structured parking.

Another favorable design element that’s common to cities of all sizes is central public space, Graf says.

“Creating that central gathering space is really critical,” he says. “That’s one of the questions we’re going to be asking Missoula, we’re not sure that Missoula has that yet. Is there that public central space in your community that either exists or if it doesn’t, is there a place to put it and would you want it there?”

Maybe that isn’t important to Missoulians—we’ll know March 5, when response sheets are handed out and Graf and his team begin the long process of planning the future of downtown. ...