

# NewWest Missoula

## Missoula Kicks Off Downtown Master Plan Process

By Dillon Tabish, 3-06-08

Despite its relative vibrancy, downtown Missoula has its share of problems and concerns including the challenges brought by growth, and Wednesday night residents and professional planners sat elbow to elbow to start dealing with those issues.

Roughly 160 people gathered in the Holiday Inn-Downtown for the first of four public workshops centered around the Downtown Master Plan, the first downtown design strategy in the city's history. City Councilmember Jason Wiener was in attendance, and came away from the workshop optimistic about the downtown's prospects.



Downtown Missoula. Photos by Dillon Tabish

"I've been to my share of public meetings and this was not the typical crowd," said Wiener, who was elected to Ward 1 last November. "I've seen a lot of familiar faces but it was encouraging for me to see so many people who care about the downtown."

According to the Office of Planning and Grants, Missoula will increase by roughly 34,000 residents in the next 20 years. The potential impact on downtown persuaded city officials to get ahead of the ball and develop a plan to address present problems and future needs.

Thirty-five firms applied to work on a design strategy with city officials and a steering committee chose Portland, Oregon-based Crandall Arambula because of its emphasis on public involvement.

The firm's principal and award-winning architects George Crandall and Don Arambula flew to Missoula for three days of meetings and Wednesday's big get-together. Right from the start, Wednesday night's workshop showcased the firm's trademark: community involvement and open discussion. "Tonight," Crandall said, "you're giving us our marching orders."

The first part of the workshop involved a presentation by both Crandall and Arambula. They outlined the keys to a successful downtown and showed examples of desirable and undesirable change. Their presentation showed shopper-friendly sidewalks, pedestrian- and biker-friendly streets, and parking structures accessible even to "Grandma."

Many of the night's questions surrounded long-debated issues for Missoula residents, like parking. "You have a lot of parking in downtown," Mr. Crandall said. "But it's in the wrong places."

Other questions concerned funding new developments, revitalizing old ones, supporting local businesses, safety, lighting and Missoula's transient population.

The planners used response sheets to help gauge public opinion. The sheets showed a map of downtown and participants were asked to mark areas that present special design opportunities and challenges. Participants were also asked to list their top three issues and concerns. Crandall Arambula will use the sheets to identify priorities and begin to develop ideas.

(For those who missed Wednesday's workshop and want to get involved, response sheets can be found online [here](#). Sheets need to be filled out and sent to planners within 10 days.)

Downtown business owners and friends Leah Morrow and Hanna Hannan carpoled to Wednesday's workshop excited to get involved in an open discussion and "represent the youth," as they put it.



"It was great for people to interact and talk about what's going on. I mean, that's what it's really about," said Hannan, who owns Zootown Arts. "I think Missoula knows its identity and we just need to implement that now," said 26-year-old Morrow, owner of Selvedge Studio.

After Crandall Arambula's presentation, the participants at each table were asked to discuss downtown's problems and possibilities. After 20 minutes, each table elected a speaker. One started by saying: "We spent the first five minutes talking about how excited we are about the whole thing."

"People got excited tonight, because like (the planners) said, big ideas yield excitement," said Hannan, 27. "Missoula is excited about their downtown area."

Although Missoula Downtown Association director Linda McCarthy was hoping for more people to show up, she was still very pleased with the night. "We had a great mix of people here," she said. "We had young and old, we had people from all over town."

Crandall liked what he saw Wednesday, too, and wasn't surprised by any of the responses or questions. "I think people are pretty progressive here and want to do the right thing," he said. "They're willing to take a look at all the possibilities right now. We saw a very positive attitude and that's what it takes to move a plan forward."

Jason Graf, the Master Plan project manager, shared Crandall's sentiments. "I think we've got some pretty good marching orders," he said.

The next workshop is scheduled for May 13 and Crandall Arambula will present its ideas and alternatives based on the response sheets and overall feedback. The remaining workshops will be completed by October 2008.

As for Wiener, who is on the steering committee working with Crandall Arambula, Wednesday was the beginning of an important public discussion.

"I think probably everybody's got some self-interested reason that is important to the downtown: they work there, they own a business there, they own property there," Wiener said. "But it seems to go deeper than that. I think people have a sort of visceral connection to the center and if there's any sort of malaise in American culture it's that we've become de-centered, and failing downtowns are the most visible symptom of that. And we have a pretty good downtown in Missoula and I think that's because we have pretty good center. Keeping it strong, that's what this is all about."