

MISSOULIAN

Residents Share Ideas for Downtown

By PAMELA J. PODGER of the Missoulian

Street cars? A convention center? A piazza? Affordable housing? About 200 people shared their desires and dreams for downtown Missoula on Wednesday night at the Holiday Inn Downtown at the Park.

The Oregon consulting firm of Crandall Arambula guided the discussion in the first of four workshops envisioning growth in the city's core in the next 20 years. A final report will be issued before Thanksgiving.

The gathering was a mix of ages, from business owners in their 20s to retirees, who pored over maps, shared their concerns and prioritized their goals. These included greater access to the riverfront, retaining a downtown police presence, creating inviting walkways on several bridges, connecting existing bike-and-walking trails, attracting more retail and other issues.

"It's amazing," said Holly Truitt, associate director of the spectrUM Discovery Area. "I'm a believer in public forums and what can come out of this discourse."

Participants were asked to identify their top three concerns for downtown. The Portland consulting firm will gather the response sheets, tabulate them and get the results posted online at www.missouladowntownbid.org/downtownmasterplan

"Those will set up the marching orders for the master plan," said George Crandall, a principal at the firm.

Theresa Cox, who runs Missoula's Carousel in Caras Park, voiced the views of several people who said it's critical to preserve the authenticity of Missoula's downtown, ensuring it isn't dominated by national chains. "These are our ideas, it is our city and it is our responsibility to take ownership," she said.

Linda McCarthy, executive director of the Missoula Downtown Association, said the next workshop will be held in mid-May. The consultants will suggest alternatives to the community's top concerns listed on the response sheets. The plan will encompass the sometimes conflicting views of retailers, professionals, neighborhoods, historic preservation advocates, government entities and others in the community.

While they expect skeptics to ask what the plan will cost, both consultants said a better question is how much the public investment and capital improvements could leverage from the private sector.

McCarthy said the scope of the downtown plan is likely to include elements such as parking, tourism, the mix of residential and retail uses, the height of buildings, width of sidewalks, public access to the riverfront, business recruitment and retention, keeping a government presence, and other issues.

McCarthy said about \$425,000 has been raised from private sources as well as the Downtown Business Improvement District, the Missoula Redevelopment Agency and the Missoula Parking Commission. The funds will be used for the study and for some aspects of its implementation.

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