

NewWest Missoula

A Streetcar in Missoula and Other Big Ideas

By Dillon Tabish, 5-15-08

The Missoula Downtown Master Plan may sound like it's all about the future, but in many ways it's a step back into the olden days.

Putting a streetcar system in the downtown and returning Front and Main Streets to two-ways were a couple of the changes discussed at the second public workshop Wednesday night in the Holiday Inn-Downtown. Master planners from the Crandall Arambula firm and roughly 280 residents worked on creating a plan for the future of Downtown Missoula.



Downtown Missoula. Photos by Emily Haas

A streetcar, like the one that used to run down Higgins Avenue in the early 20th Century, would be a great local circulator and would influence more development, said George Crandall, the firm's principal and award-winning architect.

Tables full of people were given twenty minutes (not nearly enough time, one group said) to discuss among themselves their thoughts on the firm's 15 suggestions, which ranged from open space to culture centers to housing development. The streetcar idea came up at nearly every table, and the reaction was mixed.

Some tables argued that building a new streetcar system is counterproductive considering there is already a bus system established. Other tables agreed that a streetcar could provide more maneuverability around Missoula.

The implementation of a streetcar has been a common Crandall Arambula proposal in its downtown plans. In Santa Fe, where they were hired to design a similar "Vision Plan," the issue became so contentious that planners dropped the idea all together.

At the Missoula gathering, almost every table mentioned the need for more circulation downtown, and changing Front and Main Streets to two-way streets seemed to be an easy Step 1, according to responses.

After the first public workshop in March, the Crandall Arambula team tallied the response sheets filled out by residents. The objection that received the most votes was "maintaining and expanding a mix of retail."

In response, the planners devised a strategy that would create a "retail hot spot" in the heart of downtown using Macy's as an anchor. The goal, Crandall said, is to create pedestrian-friendly street environments. One example would be to renovate the first floor of the Central Park parking garage into retail space.

According to estimates, the downtown currently supports about 275,000 square feet of existing retail but could support roughly 355,000 to 408,000 square feet by 2012.

Then, of course, this question came up: Where's everyone going to park? "Don't worry," Crandall said reassuringly. Once you come up with retail and housing options, we'll figure out where the parking will go, he said.

The second most voted on topic was "increase housing options and density downtown." Master Plan Project Manager Jason Graf expected Missoulians to support adding houses, but he didn't expect the responses that came about density downtown.

"To be honest, I'm really surprised that density in the downtown is being supported the way it is," he said after. "The people here seem to embrace the idea of infill as opposed to sprawling out in other places."

"Housing is a huge deal here for everyone, from students to work-force residents," he said as a woman walked by and patted him on the shoulder and thanked him "for all his hard work."

Another of the planners' proposals was to have a plan in place if the rail yards north of town were ever to transition, though that likely won't happen anytime soon. There are a lot of great opportunities with that space, Crandall told the audience.

In addition, there is the possibility of using the waterfront triangle as a place for either houses or employment opportunities, and was supported by just about everyone.

One topic that received mixed reviews was having a separate bike lane on Higgins Avenue and Broadway to support bicycle traffic. "Bikes are a viable mode of transportation, especially here in Missoula," Crandall said.

On the west side of Higgins, the planners suggested creating a bike lane with its own divider between it and the street. The streets would shrink, but the current situation isn't all that encouraging for bicyclists, Crandall said. Some tables loved the idea, but others said it would be too cluttered.

After the two-and-a-half hour gathering, response sheets were again collected and the answers will be tallied for the third public workshop in July.

Before the workshop, the Crandall Arambula team met with over 600 people in various groups and organizations across Missoula to discuss the planning and process. Despite dark, overcast skies and intermittent rain, the team came away smiling.

"We're really enthused," said Don Arambula. "We wanted to be provocative tonight and see what people thought and this was encouraging. I really appreciate how engaging everyone was."