

# MISSOULIAN

## Funding concerns for downtown plan raised at meeting

By *KEILA SZPALLER of the Missoulian 5-15-2008*

But where's the money? Where's the money for all the downtown goodies, like the streetcar, the "festival waterfront," the open space?

That was one question posed Wednesday to consultants on the Downtown Master Plan. Nearly 300 people attended the evening meeting at the downtown Holiday Inn, and they came to see a plan for the core of Missoula, refine it and ask questions.

George Crandall, a principal with the firm Crandall and Arambula, said the money will come, and it's precisely the high level of ambition that will attract the big dollars.

"If your vision for your downtown is bold and imaginative, you stand a much better chance of implementing it," Crandall said. That's because a timid vision won't interest anyone. A grand plan, on the other hand, attracts investors, he said. And he said if the area builds out as proposed, it will bring some \$600 million of private investment to the area.

The economy isn't booming, but Crandall also said that's all the more reason to plan so Missoula is poised to act once conditions improve. And the firm has a strong track record, he said.

He said it is not unusual for its plans to see the bulk of investment in the first five to 10 years. "These plans are all about momentum, so you want to see early success," Crandall said. Stuart Goldberg, who asked the question, said Crandall's answer satisfied him.

The entire plan will be available at [www.missouladowntownbid.org](http://www.missouladowntownbid.org). The following are some ideas from Wednesday's meeting:

- People who live downtown make less money than the area median income. The median income of downtowners is \$15,500, a consultant said. He also said it's disproportionately low because it includes students from the University of Montana. While they don't show a lot of income, he said they manage to spend money all the same. "(And) they're a very, very good market for entertainment."
- The increasing cost of energy and changing lifestyle preferences mean more and smaller housing must go downtown, the consultant said. For example, some baby boomers don't want to mow lawns anymore. He suggested loft housing and different kinds of condominiums for downtown. The demand exists, but so far, the supply has been limited, he said. Small units also could serve as second homes for tourists and seasonal residents.
- Residents support more retail than workers and visitors, a consultant said. A new resident supports four to seven square feet of retail space. A new worker, on the other hand, supports two to five square feet of retail space. Visitors support just a half a square foot to 1.5 square feet. Ideally, downtown must attract all three. The most valuable return, however, is in bringing residents downtown.

- Visitors spend \$246 per day on retail and restaurants. In this regard, Missoula is positioned well. “You have great restaurants downtown at all different price levels,” a consultant said.
- Macy's could be improved, but it is an anchor downtown all the same. Other retailers want to be nearby. “We want to find ways to keep Macy's if at all possible,” a consultant said.
- Near Macy's, consultants suggested a retail “hot spot.” They place it generally along Main and Front streets between Orange and Pattee streets. “You can build on all the wonderful assets you have there today,” a consultant said.
- Consultants encouraged Missoula to “enhance the brand of downtown.”
- They suggested Front and Main become two-way streets. That change would mean less fuel consumption, better air quality, and safer pedestrians, a consultant said.
- They suggested a bike lane separated from the main travel thoroughfare along Higgins Avenue. Experienced cyclists could still ride in the road, but amateurs also would feel comfortable biking because they wouldn't have to dodge car doors and ride with motor traffic. They said bike paths where less-seasoned riders feel safe are an important piece of creating a viable system.
- Missoula's surrounding area is growing at a rate of roughly 1 percent a year. “That's net positive, but it's not wild growth,” a consultant said. Downtown needs to position itself to capture some of that growth.
- They said the downtown area needs to plan for employment centers, like the area around St. Patrick Hospital, a “government center” around the Missoula County Courthouse, and an area closer to Madison Street. They want government employees to stay downtown.
- If the community wants a performing arts center, it should plan for a state-of-the-art facility that cuts no corners, they said. “We'd like to think big,” a consultant said.
- They suggested having a plan in place for Montana Rail Link's rail yard in case the company wants to get rid of it, which is a trend. They also said an underpass in the area with a gradual grade would work better than an overpass, like the Northside bicycle-pedestrian bridge.
- They suggested a streetcar running from employment centers through the retail hot spot and to the University of Montana campus. People who won't hop on a bus will ride a streetcar, a consultant said. A commuter rail is also part of the plan.
- Consultants also encouraged Missoula to create a “festival waterfront.” Instead of using areas near the Clark Fork River for parking, they suggested creating more green space and making more room for activities.

The Missoula Downtown Association's Linda McCarthy said consultants will refine the plan with comments from the public. They return at the end of July to present an update.

Along with the MDA, the following organizations support the project, according to the project Web site: The Downtown Business Improvement District, Missoula Parking Commission, Missoula Redevelopment Agency, Missoula Area Economic Development Corp., and private property and business owners.

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