

MISSOULIAN

Downtown planners emphasize catalysts for growth

By KEILA SZPALLER of the Missoulian
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Building a stronger downtown will take longer than expected in the hurting economy, but planning consultants Wednesday urged Missoula to keep spurring growth in the heart of the city.

“We think that you could be a model for the nation,” said George Crandall, with Crandall Arambula, a planning firm based in Portland, Ore.

Crandall and other consultants reported Wednesday evening to an estimated 300 people at a meeting about the Greater Downtown Master Plan. The aim of the plan is to ensure downtown thrives in the ways of retail, parking, employment, housing and transportation. The Holiday Inn Parkside event focused on how to implement the plan. It marked the fourth and final workshop in nearly a year and included more than 2,000 participants, according to the Missoula Downtown Association.

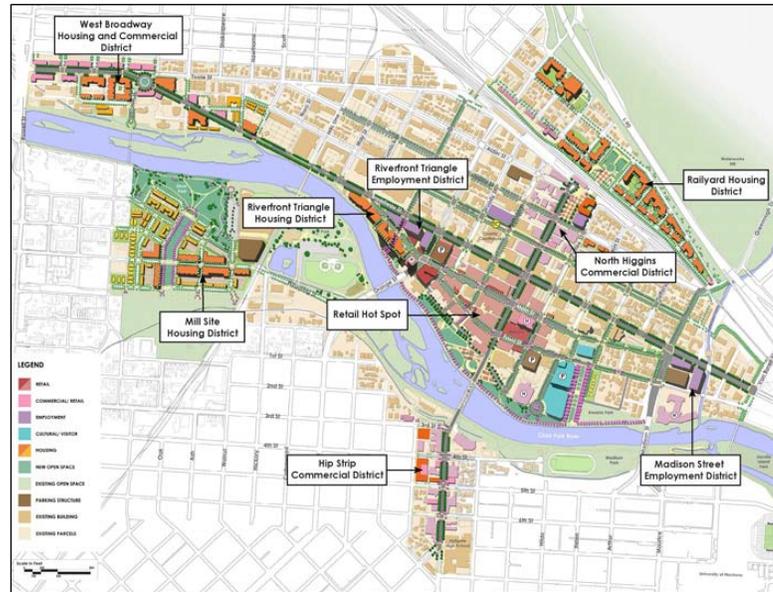
At the meeting, consultants shared the projects they believe must get off the ground the most quickly - “catalyst projects.” One consultant stressed stark economic conditions ahead. Members of the audience offered Macy’s a smattering of applause at one point for its presence among the local shops downtown. They raised concerns about affordable housing and asked how other areas of town will fare if the focus remains downtown. They also praised the product, the plan for downtown.

“Let’s get it done,” said Dan Cederberg, with the Business Improvement District, which supported the process.

The most important immediate ingredients for a vibrant downtown are the following, according to consultants: build a parking structure to help Macy’s and provide parking for First Interstate Bank; develop East Main Street to strengthen retail and the core of downtown; create a government campus to keep government services downtown; and build the Riverfront Triangle to encourage development in an area that’s been needing it for nearly a decade.

A “Balanced City Center” is the key to a stronger community, Crandall said. He pointed to the quarter-mile radius around Higgins Avenue and Broadway as the target.

“The idea is there is a center that provides for all of your needs,” Crandall said.



Packing everything from grocery stores, jobs, retail, and housing in that area cuts down on the number of trips people need to make by car. That saves them time and money, Crandall said.

In fact, he said if Missoula were to build up its city center, he estimated the change would yield \$34 million people aren't spending on gasoline. That's all money that can be spent locally.

"In the end, it's about economic stimulus," he said.

Toward the end of the meeting, audience members shared their perspectives on the plan. Kaia Peterson said people who sat at her table wanted to know how the rest of Missoula would be affected if all the resources went downtown.

"What happens to the rest of our community?" Peterson said.

Crandall said downtown is the heart of the city, and if the heart is strong, the city's extremities also will be. The project cost some \$450,000 and public funds paid for roughly 75 percent. The business community contributed.

A business owner said a lot of Hip Strip customers ride bikes, so Hip Strippers support bike lanes. Ear Candy's Chris Henry also offered a concern. If affordable housing is to work in the city center, the services residents need must also be available there, he said.

Now, though, a resident might have to head all the way to Reserve Street for day care and then go to Third and Russell for groceries, Henry said. Crandall responded by saying the final plan would have answers.

"It is an imperative that we address your concern very directly," Crandall said.

Generally, the Downtown Master Plan calls for housing at the rail yard; the development of "Depot Square," at the north end of Higgins Avenue; a "retail hot spot" flanked by employment in the Riverfront Triangle and on Madison Street; and a cultural district near Kiwanis Park.

"You are responsible for implementation," MDA executive director Linda McCarthy told the full conference room. "This is our plan. This is our community."

Along with the MDA, the following organizations support the project: 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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