

Downtown dreams

Planners push improvements to fend off recession

By Jesse Froehling

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It looks like George Crandall and Don Arambula got it right.

When the Portland, Ore.-based urban designers presented their ideas about the future of downtown Missoula on Nov. 19, the 300 or so in attendance offered mostly approving comments.

It was the fourth time the duo had sought the public's input for the Downtown Master Plan during the last eight months and the result is a wish list of sorts. Given the sagging economy, the city is more likely to see some projects come to fruition than others.

"Obviously it's very ambitious and intentionally so," says Ward 1 Councilmember Dave Strohmeier, whose ward encompasses most of downtown. "But nonetheless, what I think can't happen in an economic environment like this is that we simply retrench and forget to look long term."

Crandall and Arambula envision Main Street and Front Street as two-way thoroughfares. The plan also calls for a new police station, a cultural district, improved parks along the Clark Fork River, protected bike lanes, revamped commercial and residential spaces and maybe even a street car.

But with money tight, the city will have to prioritize. Just a few weeks ago, Mayor John Engen asked city department heads to tighten their budgets by 3 percent, and although those cuts have no direct effect on the plan's outcome, it's a sign of the times. Crandall and Arambula brought an economist to the workshop to stress just how bad the situation has become.

But there could be a silver lining. Councilman Jason Wiener, Strohmeier's Ward 1 counterpart, says he anticipates a new federal economic stimulus package that's heavy on public works projects. "Our senators will be looking for projects that are designed and scoped and budgeted and ready to go," he says.

To that end, Crandall and Arambula have identified a list of key projects to kick start the process, including development of the riverfront triangle and construction of a hotel/condominium at the corner of Main and Pattee streets, perhaps connected to Macy's by a skywalk spanning the alley. To further strengthen Macy's hand, Crandall and Arambula hope to build a parking garage kitty corner from the department store at Pattee and Front streets with retail space on the ground level. Other priorities include a new local government center and a retail anchor—much like Macy's—at Orange and Main.

Of course, some of these ideas will prove more workable than others. On the one hand, the parking lots should come easily, says Rod Austin, Director of Operations for the Downtown Business Improvement District. The city parking commission has some of the strongest bond ratings of similar organizations in the country, Austin says, and some of the surrounding businesses that stand to gain parking or retail space may contribute as well.

But a new retail anchor on Orange looks a long way off when viewed through the prism of the grim economy.



Photo by Chad Harder

Development of the Riverfront Triangle figures prominently in the Missoula downtown master plan

Perhaps the most popular component of the downtown plan, judging by the enthusiastic crowd response to Crandall and Arambula's presentation, involves extending bike lanes along Higgins Avenue from the rail line to Brooks. To hear Arambula and Crandall tell it, Missoula's bike use is downright miniscule compared to what it could be. Just 7 percent of our daily trips take place on bikes. But, if you take all the bike lanes in downtown Missoula, connect them, protect them and extend them, the mode split, as the designers call it—the ratio of bike riders to drivers— could quintuple.

Crandall explains that although a handful of bike riders might dig the danger and adrenaline associated with sketchy bike lanes and rush hour traffic, it's not as much fun if you toss a kid or two in a trailer and already have a couple gray hairs. For many people, the traffic associated with say, the intersection of Van Buren and Broadway or the Higgins Ave. bridge, might frighten them off their bikes and back behind the wheel. Eliminate the risk, Crandall says, and that 7 percent mode split skyrockets to 40 percent. As an added bonus, people would drive less, saving them money. And they'd get some healthy exercise, too.

But first, the city needs to adopt the downtown plan as an amendment to its growth policy. If that doesn't happen, none of this will. Strohmeier says Crandall and Arambula will prepare a final draft of the report to accommodate public comments from the last workshop. City Council members should expect the final version next week, he says. If all goes well, the planning board will address it as an amendment to the growth policy in January, the first step towards Council approval.