



# Casper focuses on downtown core

By Greg Fladager | Posted: Monday, February 27, 2012 2:00 pm

A strategic plan that calls for bold action in downtown Casper is being created, and last week residents and the Casper City Council heard the overview.

“It’s much easier to implement a bold vision than it is a timid one,” said George Crandall, of Crandall Arambula, a consultant from Portland, Ore. “Timid ones never get implemented because no one’s excited about it, and you can’t develop the adequacy that you need for it to become a vision.”

Crandall added it was vision built on solid economics that worked, and not through rose-colored glasses.

“We can be bold, but you’ve got to respect what the market will build,” Crandall said. “You need to be able to go to a retailer conference and say, ‘Here’s our proposal, and are you interested in coming in here Mr. Safeway? What’s it going to take to get you to come in here?’”

The vision presented to the city council, and at two public meetings, focused on Casper’s downtown core.

“That circle is a quarter-mile walk from the center, and that’s a five minute walk. The thing is, that’s a convenient walk, people will walk a quarter-mile,” Crandall said.

While the consultants have only begun their work, they told the council there are some basics to success, no matter where you go.

“You need to think big, and say what do you want?” said Don Arambula. “If you go visit a city around America, the ones that are memorable have a great retail heart. You don’t go to a downtown just because it has a great civic center or a great office district. People don’t visit those. You go to cities with retail, and I think as we start this process, we’re not sure if we can make it better, but I think that’s our objective right now.”

“There’s a critical mass that we need to get. We need, for example, 125 to 250,000 square feet of retail to be a going concern,” Arambula said. “You could spread that all through downtown, and ... it doesn’t get you anywhere, it’s got to be all in contact. So, does it go up Second Street, up one of these streets? We’ll find out, but I think that’s what we’re looking for, we need a tight, contact critical, mass of retail.”

“The traditional Main Street follows that formula, and you’re very close to this formula right now, except there are some soft spots,” Crandall said. “It’s about inducing market demand where there’s no market today, or very little market today, and creating a framework that developers want to get next to.”

The consultants said they weigh developing regulations very carefully because there’s a strong desire for property rights and controlling your own destiny; but they said by regulating only what’s important, it allows for flexibility elsewhere, while still providing an “insurance policy” for developers.

“This thing about inducing market demand is really about attracting developers to your downtown, and developers want predictability,” stated Crandall. “They want certainty, and the guidelines, believe it or not, help really provide that. So it’s a positive on the developer’s side.”

“We’ve been in cities where we had quality developers, and they won’t develop in your town unless you’ve got guidelines, because it’s a crapshoot,” added Arambula. “If I’m going to invest a couple million dollars in a building, and I’m going to create a quality building, I want to make sure the guy next to me doesn’t put up a pink elephant.”

One of the issues raised by the council concerned traffic in the core area.

“For those of us who work downtown, we avoid it, because it’s so difficult to drive through the serpentine,” commented council



member Paul Bertoglio. “You really can’t see anything because you’re focusing on, depending on what block you’re on, the cars backing out.”

“You know we hadn’t heard that,” responded Crandall. “But Don and I walked the street, and we said, ‘What the hell is wrong with this street?’ And I stood in the middle, and I said, ‘This is [very difficult] to drive.’ I’m looking down here, it’s like going through a parking lot, because of the in and out, that’s all you see is the rear ends of vehicles on a street. That isn’t inviting to the auto.”

“There’s got to be a balance here,” remarked Arambula. “Sightlines, ease of access for everybody is what we’re looking at. Now we don’t want to ream this out like a pipe, but we do want to create an environment that’s friendly.”

Both consultants said, however, that there actually needs to be an increase of vehicle traffic on Second Street to help retailers.

“Second Street is marginal, you don’t have enough drive-by traffic,” Arambula observed. “We know typically you need at least 5,000 trips by a front door a day down a retail street to make it work that edge, and you’d be better off if you had 8,000. So, in a sense, you want to induce a little bit more traffic on Second, believe it or not, and so we need to recognize that cars are part of the downtown.”

This is in counterpoint, however, to the consultant’s emphasis that the pedestrians need to be the number one consideration in the retail areas.

“One of the things I worry about,” said Bertoglio, noting he spoke with family in Missoula, Mont., where Crandall Arambula did a project, “is you put so much emphasis on beautification, that you make it almost undrivable. That you focus so much on cutting your street widths down for all these other things, and you literally can’t get in and out of your downtown areas.”

“We understand that concern, but the places that you want to visit are pedestrian friendly,” Crandall pointed out. “So while getting in and out of the downtown is really important ... at the same time, if the pedestrian shopper is a priority, it’s a little different. In other words, that’s where you need to focus, because if it isn’t, you won’t be, in the end, successful.”

And speaking of success, the consultants noted the downtown is competing with outlying shopping malls and stores, which led into the issue of parking.

“We talk about retail because that’s the most difficult parking to get,” Arambula said. “Employees need to be dealt with, but they will park anywhere that it’s cheaper, and visitors park about anywhere because they’re going to be here for all day. But you really need to deal with the retail person first, because you’re in a competitive market with the parking lot guys on the edge of town.”

“We know that if you’re over a block away it’s too far away, that you have to be within a block of your retail Main Street or it doesn’t count in people’s minds, and that’s what it amounts to,” commented Crandall. “So we’ll be looking at what your total retail build out will be, and then we’ll be translating that into number of cars that have to be parked, and we’ll say, ‘Here’s where you’ll park it.’ We get very site-specific with these things.”

The consultants said there may be the need for a parking structure, but one that’s almost invisible in plain sight.

“That parking structure has to be designed so it’s shopper friendly, otherwise they won’t park in it again. They’ll feel it’s unsafe, that it’s confusing and it’s hazardous,” Crandall said. “So we need to get rid of all those problems in designing the structure so that it is, as we say, ‘grandma friendly.’ We know how to do that.”

A number of other issues were also considered, including the need for a major retail grocery store, mixed housing and open space, which in Casper’s case may include recognition of the Platte River.

“A grocery store is a part of any downtown, and there are fundamentals that we need to respect ... we know you just can’t put them anywhere, they need to be large because they need to be competitive, otherwise people won’t shop there,” Arambula said, adding later, “Plazas are always important. They provide a focus for community, a so-called living room, but they have to be highly disciplined or they won’t work.”

The consultants said they were appreciative of meeting with the council early in the process.

“This is really a unique opportunity to talk to you because city councils are often the missing piece in the work. In other words, the stuff comes to you later on, and it’s really too late in the game, or you’re not familiar with it, or your fingerprints aren’t on it,” Crandall said.

Crandall Arambula was hired by the city to develop a new downtown strategic plan by April 8, with a \$50,000 allocation from the

council, and another \$50,000 from the Amoco Reuse Agreement Joint Powers Board.

“The schedule is shown here,” Crandall said. “One is where we are now, two is in April when we’ll come back with some alternatives, and three would be implementation strategy. It moves really quickly, it moves fast, and we think that’s an interesting discipline for us all. It will keep us focused.”