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Great downtowns don't just happen: Vision Fairbanks faces watershed decisions soon

by David van den Berg, Community Perspective
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Community Perspective

Vision Fairbanks is the community-supported economic development plan for downtown Fairbanks. The first two pieces of the plan will take definite shape this spring and early summer through the actions of the City Council, Borough Assembly and the Fairbanks Metropolitan Area Transportation System. Coming almost two years after the plan's adoption, a series of votes and decisions will reveal our civic leaders' attitude to economic development downtown.

The two pieces of the plan up for decisions are big structural changes that set the stage for revitalization: roadway improvements on Cushman and Barnette streets and zoning refinements that protect the investment environment. Neither of these measures will revitalize downtown — but they set the stage. Neither will cause to appear overnight heated sidewalks, Nordstroms or a Performing Arts Center — but they get us closer.

Because roadway improvements cost money and because zoning is a legislative process, Vision Fairbanks is not yet market-driven revitalization. It is a political process at this point, and the “green shoots” of revitalization are coming to a decision. If you want a better downtown, don't wait a moment longer to be heard.

First up are new zone types contained in borough Ordinance 2010-09. The ordinance proposes to amend Title 18 of the Borough Code of Ordinances by establishing a Downtown Supporting Commercial District, Retail Hot Spot District and downtown core development standards. The new zones types refine existing Central Business District zoning; the development standards enhance the pedestrian experience at the street level and ground floor. The impact of the ordinance is to define an investment environment by vividly describing the mix of uses we want at the ground floor, where we mortals tread. Further, the zoning refinements affirm a property owner's right to see their property appreciate in value by the actions and complementary land use of their neighbors.

Second, the city and FMATS will decide once and for all whether or not to proceed with two-way traffic revisions for Cushman and Barnette streets. The decision will be informed by a study due in draft form mid-April and in final form by mid-June. New zoning types and roadway improvements are considered catalysts to revitalizing economic development downtown. We all know the economy is down. There are vacancies throughout Fairbanks, and the center of the universe for retail at the intersection of the Steese and Johansen retains considerable advantages in attracting new development: abundant cheap land, two-way streets and a pending public investment of at least \$15 million in new roads.

Downtown can't match that, but it can have a game plan to be competitive. That

plan vividly describes, through draft zone types, the downtown we want to be and that plan calls for two-way streets downtown.

Restoring two-way traffic circulation to Cushman and Barnette streets will rid the borough of its only one-way streets, improve the pedestrian environment, increase on-street parking, make businesses more visible and more viable and thereby improve the investment environment. Further, Cushman is the only street downtown that has the adjacent land area and redevelopment potential to accommodate a viable concentration of “destination” retail. As a one-way street, Cushman is not pedestrian-friendly. The narrow sidewalks, high-speed traffic and lack of on-street parking create a hostile pedestrian environment.

So who gets to decide the fate of downtown — and when? Revitalization is a political process at this point. So that means you can influence downtown's future by communicating to our civic leaders what you want for downtown.

On April 5 at 7 p.m., the City Council will take public testimony and weigh in on the draft zone types proposed in borough Ordinance 2010-09.

The next day, April 6 at 7 p.m., the Borough Planning Commission will also take public testimony before forwarding its recommendation to the Borough Assembly, which has final say and will take up the matter sometime this summer.

The city or FMATS will have the last word on whether or not to convert Cushman and Barnette streets to two-way circulation — and that could come to the fore as early as April, certainly by June.

Downtown is already Fairbanks' “living room,” seat of many signature events, site of our genuine pioneer history and showroom of our community character. Our downtown can be even better. Great downtowns don't just happen.

David van den Berg is the executive director of the Downtown Association of Fairbanks, a group of downtown professionals and retailers that partners with the City of Fairbanks and the Fairbanks North Star Borough in economic development downtown.

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