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The future of downtown

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Kris King, center with “Love” sweatshirt, engages in the discussion on the future of downtown Livingston at the De Sean Batura

Livingston residents participated in two events this month to help direct consultants in creating a downtown master plan, parking plan, way-finding plan, and streetscape improvement plan. One event was held at the Depot Center on Nov. 14 and the other was

held two days later at the Shane Center.

Using stickers placed on large maps of the downtown area, residents helped the consultants determine where parking options may need to be improved, as well as where underutilized parcels could make good candidates for pocket parks, plazas, residential units, shops, restaurants, and hotels. Residents also helped determine where popular tourist destinations and gateway areas are and where activities are held related to entertainment, arts and other amenities.

The downtown plan study area includes Sacajawea and Miles parks and portions of downtown.

In a recent online survey that garnered 391 respondents — 77% of whom were Livingston residents — consultants asked residents questions about their favorite part of downtown, their vision for the area, and the one thing they would improve. As to the last question, the most frequent request was parking, with safety, diversity of shopping options, and additional green space/trees being frequently mentioned, according to a Nov. 14 presentation by Andy Rutz.

Rutz is the principal/founder of Colorado-based Crescendo Planning + Design, the consultant firm hired for the project.

As to their vision for downtown, many survey respondents emphasized a desire to maintain and preserve the community and its character while making it more vibrant and accessible, including from a parking standpoint, according to Rutz's presentation. But he said it wasn't uncommon for survey respondents to indicate "nothing" as to what they would improve, which the consultants took to indicate a desire to maintain and preserve the character of downtown.

At the Nov. 14 event, residents expressed a desire for longer-term parking spaces — spaces available for more than three hours — downtown, especially near The Depot Center; and many wanted higher-turnover, shorter-term parking on Main Street — especially near Main and Park streets, according to findings presented at the Nov. 16 event.

A consistent theme based on feedback gathered at the Nov. 14 event was a desire to use public art as a gateway opportunity in and around downtown, such as along Park Street, particularly at 7th and Park streets, Main and Park streets and leading from the core of downtown to Sacajawea Park. There also was a lot of interest in opportunities for temporary road closures and events, according to information presented at the Nov. 16 event.

Feedback from the Nov. 16 event indicated many residents want more street trees, a riverwalk trail, pocket parks, multi-use trails, a festival/greenway street, permanent curb extensions, and more. Also popular among Nov. 16 event attendees were the prospects of more upper-story downtown residential units, alley beautification, local convenience stores, outdoor dining, temporary event stages, plaques telling local history, art installations connecting downtown to Sacajawea Park, and more.

Better services, amenities City Manager Grant Gager, who attended the Nov. 14 event, told the Enterprise that having a downtown master plan will greatly increase the city's chances of obtaining various federal and state grants.

“Some of these grants would not otherwise come to the city unless it has a master plan demonstrating to our granters that we’ve taken the time to engage the community, listen to what they have to say and then formulate a plan,” Gager said. “It’s a benefit to any [grant] application that goes in ... in my experience, funding agencies look much more highly upon something that is existing in a plan.”

Gager evaluated grant applications for about three years when he worked for the Connecticut General Assembly, he said.

More state and federal grants for Livingston is a way for local taxpayers to get more of their money back in the form of better public services and amenities, Gager noted.

“Every state and federal grant should be looked at as a rebate,” Gager said. “If it doesn’t come to Livingston, it’s going somewhere else in Montana.”

Implementation plan

Crescendo will provide an implementation plan that suggests grant opportunities to pursue based on contents of the downtown master plan, according to Rutz and Gager.

Rutz indicated Livingston seems well-positioned to prepare for future challenges. Some cities that begin developing downtown master plans do so from the standpoint of needing to reinvent themselves or fill vacant storefronts, or address other deficiencies, he said.

“I think the difference here is that Livingston sits in a pretty advantageous, healthy place already,” Rutz said. “All cities are like organisms, they all grow and change, and Livingston is unique in that it has retained — especially from an architectural and character standpoint — a really strong sense of its history and culture. But it has changed a lot despite retaining all that over the years. And so I think this [master planning] process just gives the opportunity to say, ‘These are the elements that are uniquely Livingston that we want to put some kind of safeguards around to make sure we don’t lose the things that have helped define [the city] ...’”

He agreed it’s possible to balance conserving culture, heritage and sense of place with the needs of new residents and new generations. Change is unavoidable, but it doesn’t have to be painful or extreme, according to Rutz.

“I think the community can do its best work by taking the time to understand each other’s willingness for trade-offs — an acknowledgement that there are going to be some ideas for change or improvements that might be a friction point today, but it might serve

your grandchildren really well,” Rutz said. “And where is the sweet spot of being able to say, ‘We can tolerate this in the short term, because it’s gonna set us up spectacularly well,’ or even, ‘This is extremely inconvenient for me, but I know it’s gonna help like three or four of my other fellow business owners in the downtown,’ — the sort of rising-tide-lifts-all-boats mentality.”

Compromise vs. consensus

Rather than aim for building consensus, residents would do well to aim for the more realistic goal of compromises, he said.

“Consensus is an admirable goal, but it’s one that could be really challenging to get to, and if you can get folks comfortable with compromise and incremental change, it tends to be a little bit more of a resilience strategy that makes sense,” Rutz said. “Again, one way to think about it is [to examine] what’s maybe not best for me in the short term or even in the next five years, but what about the people who are gonna live here and their particular challenges they might be facing.”

Crescendo will be working with focus groups and developing preliminary recommendations in January, according to a project timeline at www.downtownlivingston.org, where people can learn more about the process.

To share your ideas for downtown Livingston, visit <https://tinyurl.com/5n7tnrss>.