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Coolidge News

Community discusses future visions of downtown district

By BRIAN AHNMARK, Editor November 08, 2006

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Imagine downtown Coolidge bustling with businesses and restaurants, shops and arcades, theaters and multi-cultural entertainment. Families linger on the sidewalk beneath the shade of trees; a crowd gathers at the farmer's market; and out-of-town visitors head south from the Casa Grande Ruins National Monument to spend a day shopping and dining in the city.

On Oct. 23, the Coolidge City Council Chambers were bursting with such dreams, as roughly 50 community members gathered for a "visioning session" with Hyett- Palma, a Virginia-based contractor that has been hired by the city to set downtown revitalization in motion.

Dolores Palma of HyettPalma detailed a four-step action agenda for downtown.

* Establish a downtown vision by working with community members. Palma referred to the process committee, a group of citizens, business owners and local government officials who collected data over the past several months to aid in the research portion of the agenda.

* Complete a market analysis based on retail and office potential, as well as housing. "This study will be grounded in economic realities," Palma stressed.

* After determining where community desires and economic reality overlap, the next step is determining a five-year strategic course of action.

* Finally, work with management to establish implementation of downtown revitalization projects. "This is action-oriented and based on community desires," she said. Palma stressed that HyettPalma considered community members to be the local experts.

Palma opened the floor to the roughly 50 community members in attendance, encouraging them to "stick to what you want to see, and let the consultants figure out how it will get accomplished. Don't worry about what's on the books, such as the General Plan."

Palma asked the citizens to imagine the 12 square blocks of downtown in the year 2012.

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"Assuming the community works together - and not just City Hall and the downtown businesses, but the entire community - imagine that everyone is proud of that effort. What would be accomplished?"

The first item stressed was that downtown should be safe for families, with less crime and well-lighted streets and sidewalks. Pam Leal, owner of D&J Trends, suggested the downtown would be more vibrant if vacant buildings were filled with businesses and shops. Rather than plywood storefronts boarded up from disuse, community members would like to see improved facades and entryways.

"Make it a destination," suggested Councilwoman Judy Lopez, stressing the need for trees, benches and landscaping. The ultimate wishlist also included restaurants, culturally diverse entertainment, and a farmer's market, with shops and pastimes available that would appeal to all generations.

Palma asked community members to detail what the downtown district would look like. Jacque Hendrie-Henry and others expressed a feeling that many buildings are beyond repair, but Leal said that sometimes, it just takes a little extra effort.

"I used to feel the same way, but those buildings on Coolidge Avenue have been turned into beautiful buildings," she said. "I would have torn them down."

Senior City Planner Sue Laybourn noted that historic revitalization guidelines often direct cities to restore buildings to their original design, "but in some cases, that's canvas and two-by-fours," she said. "Some of our downtown buildings were originally built during the Depression."

Discussion turned to preservation versus demolition. Councilman Gilbert Lopez encouraged a balance between buildings worth keeping and buildings that should be demolished; then, he said, establish a theme.

"When you come into downtown Coolidge, you should know you're in downtown Coolidge," he said.

Bob Marsh, a local resident and member of the Planning and Zoning Commission, expanded on that thought.

"If we identify a couple of buildings we want to keep and put a bulldozer on the trash, we'll end up with a better downtown," he said.

Community members envisioned a pedestrian-friendly design with "more green, less asphalt," perhaps placing more emphasis on programs and improvements at San Carlos Park. Older building designs could be mixed with modern architecture, sculptures and art.

Palma asked what types of establishments citizens would like to see downtown; answers ranged from cafes and restaurants to boutiques, nightclubs, arcades, theaters, bookstores, art stores, professional offices and a civic center. Community members generally supported plans to keep the Coolidge Public Library, City Hall, Post Office and Coolidge school district office downtown.

"There's never enough money to market wildly and extensively," Palma said. "Imagine you have a limited amount of marketing money. Who do you try to appeal to?"

Public Works Director Don Peters said the city should try to draw tourists from the Casa Grande Ruins National Monument south into the downtown area. Other

potential business customers include winter visitors, new residents of master-planned communities, weekend travelers from biker clubs or Lions Club fly-ins, travelers on the future freeway east of the city, and students from Central Arizona College. Farmers, business commuters and residents of the Gila River Indian Community were also listed as potential downtown clientele.

Palma asked community members to formulate a priority list.

"Clean it up, make it safe," Vice Mayor Jon Thompson said. Other suggestions included beautifying the district with trees; demolishing old buildings and filling the existing structures with businesses and offices; establishing incentives to build houses downtown; improving signage of existing businesses; discouraging investors from sitting on property until real estate prices top out; and building road medians to slow traffic.

Hurdles in the way of progress include crime, acquisition of property, absentee owners and funding. But Sherry Ulmer, Chamber of Commerce director, said better attitudes would go a long way toward the revitalization project.

"It would help if people didn't look at what's wrong, but rather, how we can turn this around by working together," she said. "There's a lot of apathy. It ruins us."

Palma closed the discussion by asking community members what they would like to overhear out-of-towners saying about the city of Coolidge.

"Let's stay for the whole weekend."

"It reminds me of where I grew up."

"I'd like to move here."

"I wish they would do this back home."

"I haven't had this much fun since I was a kid."

"This city takes pride in itself and its heritage."

"There are reasonable prices and friendly people here."

"This city is unique and special."

Palma directed further thoughts on revitalization to Josh Busard, assistant city planner. Suggestions for downtown can be e-mailed to Busard at joshuab@coolidgeaz.com.

"Our goal is to look at downtown through your eyes and do the best we can to make that a reality," Palma said.

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