



George Crandall of Crandall Arambula, creators of the original Racine Downtown Development Plan, meets with Downtown stakeholders and interested members of the public Thursday in the City Hall Annex.

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Next step: Redefining 'Downtown'

Experts return to look beyond Racine's traditional neighborhoods

BY MICHAEL BURKE
Journal Times

RACINE - Downtown's borders will be shoved outward in the next plan for revitalizing the area, planners said Thursday.

Crandall Arambula, the Portland, Ore., firm that designed the original Downtown redevelopment plan, is back to update that plan, adopted in 1999. Representatives of the firm met twice Thursday with Downtown stakeholders, asking what people would like to see happen. The opinions will be considered as the urban renewal experts redraw Downtown's revitalization blueprint during the next eight months or so.

On Thursday morning, partners George Crandall and Don Arambula hailed Downtown's progress in the past five years. "It's really remarkable what you have done in Racine," Crandall said. "When we arrived (the first time), there wasn't a lot going on."

He cited the developments around one "anchor" site, at Main and Sixth streets including the Johnson Building,

Sam Johnson Parkway and the Racine Art Museum; new housing; a new office building at 1 Main St.; new businesses; and a more pedestrian-friendly Main Street.

"It's a report card that would get an 'A' by anyone's grading," Crandall said.

Arambula added: "There's an attitude that it's OK to invest Downtown, and five years ago the attitude was that it was not OK."

Crandall said only a few cities have taken the additional step of a "second-generation" renewal plan. The SC Johnson Fund is footing the bill again.

The first time around, Crandall Arambula gave Racine a menu of capital improvements from which to choose and will do that again, Crandall said. Also again, the firm will give Racine a schedule for what should happen within the first 120 days after the plan's adoption. "You want to create momentum," he said. "If you don't see momentum immediately, it won't happen."

Although Racine should continue to concentrate on the heart of Downtown, Crandall said his firm also will be looking at a much wider area and how it fits with what happens in Downtown proper. For example, they will:

- Look more intensively at ways to make better use of lakefront and riverfront areas.
- Stress the addition of new housing in the area, including using vacant or underused former industrial buildings. "Housing has to be a major consideration here," Arambula said. They said they will also make recommendations for the former Walker Manufacturing site, although it lies beyond what is typically considered Downtown.
- Look at other corridors and areas outside the Downtown core. Two important corridors will be Washington Avenue from about the Junction area to Downtown and the new transit center to Downtown, because they are entryways from beyond the Racine area.

- Emphasize the west end of Downtown and the so-called anchor around Sixth and Marquette streets.

Kate Remington, owner of Remington May Gallery, 613 Sixth St., said she thought that area has been underdeveloped, "and therefore Downtown progress has hit a snag. We haven't felt much of the revitalization."

Another important aspect of the new plan will be a study of Downtown's retail mix and how to build upon it. The resulting recommendations will not only suggest specific kinds of businesses still needed, but where they should go and how to go about recruiting them, Arambula said. "Before, the plan was quite general," Crandall said. The motivation was just to get more businesses into the area. "Now, it will get specific," he said.

The planners said the new plan also will suggest a detailed building design code. That, if adopted, could prevent the addition of building styles that are incompatible with the rest of Downtown, they said.