

Vision unveiled for reborn downtown

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Organizers behind a downtown revitalization plan said Wednesday that a handful of public projects, including a review of local codes, construction standards and zoning laws, will need to take shape soon if the plan is to move from paper to concrete.

The Vision Fairbanks plan, unveiled by planners Wednesday, calls for the use of public projects — including an upcoming redesign of downtown streets — to spur private investment. A project map showed a proposed blend of shopping and office districts and residential neighborhoods in the city's core. Planners offered suggestions for implementing the plan, which will eventually be brought before local policymakers for approval.

An estimated 400 participants used Wednesday's workshop, held at the Westmark Fairbanks Hotel & Convention Center, to weigh in on commercial and retail projects they'd like to see downtown. Possibilities included a grocery store, a performing arts center, a convention center and hotel and a transit-focused streetcar system.

Before those projects can come, a handful of time-sensitive or "catalyst" projects are needed to set the wheels in motion, said George Crandall, with the Portland-based design firm Crandall Arambula.

They could include changes in laws governing building setbacks or sidewalks and changes aimed at making downtown more pedestrian-friendly, planner Don Arambula said.

"Developers like certainty, and that regulatory framework will provide that certainty. They'll know what the rules are," Crandall said. A public skateboard park — something proposed early in the project by the public — could be built early to capitalize on public momentum, he said.

The planning team will refine the project this fall before returning for follow-up meetings focused on residential neighborhoods.

Work on the revitalization plan kicked off last winter after the Alaska Legislature approved a grant to the Downtown Association of Fairbanks, which spearheaded much of the project.

Workshop participants offered general support Wednesday, particularly if the plan succeeds in adding a grocery store to the city's core. Resident Jane Haigh said while the project might rely partly on the endorsement of local governments, it will fall to supporters to keep others informed as the plan progresses.

"We need to continue to bring the whole community along so it doesn't seem like it's being railroaded through," she said.

The plan takes a long-range approach toward redevelopment. It calls for the handful of "catalyst" projects to be built within the next five



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years. Prospects include the reconstruction of Cushman and Barnette streets, which would be converted to accommodate two-way traffic and on-street parking; a town square on the east side of Cushman Street; and contracts with private developers.

Organizers said the public projects, which could cost a collective \$21 million, could spur an estimated \$144 million in investments from private investment. Downtown Association president Therese Sharp said the critical step is to re-introduce two-way traffic and on-street parking to major north-south streets.

Planners identified the site of Sadler's Home Furnishings as prime for retail "redevelopment," suggesting the large Cushman Street lot would be perfect for a three-story indoor shopping center.

A color-coded map of the draft plan also includes room for new offices along the west side of Barnette Street between Second and Sixth avenues.

Other potential projects mentioned Wednesday include construction projects including a grocery store; events, like a focus on more winter celebrations along the Chena River; a winter garden; a performing arts center; and a convention center and hotel. Crandall cautioned that in a competitive convention market, a convention center would need to be physically connected to a hotel.

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