

July 13, 2006

Downtown Face Lift

Middleford Commons would turn Bartlett Street into a promenade of grassy fields, fountains and gardens bounded by Lithia Motors' new headquarters and other development under designs unveiled Wednesday.

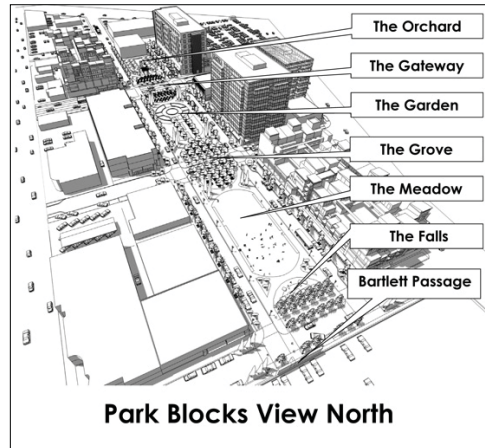
If plans are approved, demolition could start this year and construction next summer, city officials said.

A dozen citizens attended the Medford Urban Renewal Agency's forum on the \$169 million, multi-block urban redevelopment project between Central and Riverside avenues and Jackson and Sixth streets.

George Crandall, of Crandall Arambula, a Portland architectural firm hired by the city and MURA to design Middleford Commons, said the neighborhood needs something to attract commercial and residential development.

He proposes three park blocks of trees, grass, a formal garden, a large-scale water fountain and a brewpub at the north end. The portion of the Sixth Street parking garage that pedestrians would use to access Middleford from downtown would be turned into an enclosed walkway to be more inviting, said Crandall.

But George Kramer, historic preservation consultant who also works with MURA on its façade improvement program, said he worried that the quadrant with its fancy park blocks would pull too much interest off of Main Street, which MURA has just spent 18 years revitalizing.



"To me this design is an ambitious design that's totally inward looking with a tunnel connecting it to downtown," he said.

Details of retail and residential space are yet to be worked out, but a multistory Lithia Motors headquarters would provide the anchor. Lithia has not decided where it will build its new headquarters but has expressed interest in the Middleford project.

Possibly the only current building that would survive on Bartlett Street under the plan is the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph. Buildings housing the Greyhound bus station, Littrell Auto Parts and the Mary Phipps Center are being considered for demolition.

John Enders, executive director of the Southern Oregon Historical Society, said the project should look to preservation and restoration of historic buildings rather than complete demolition and construction.

Crandall said the goal is to retain some of the old buildings.

"In the end you don't want to end up looking like any city in the country," he said, adding that downtown Medford has unique older buildings. "Whatever is built here should not compete with that," he said.

Scott Henselman, owner of Henselman Realty & Management, said he hopes the planners will encourage current property owners to be part of the redevelopment process.

Lori Hopkinson said she hopes the Medford Market, a proposed cooperative food store, is given consideration within Middleford Commons.

"One of the last planning steps is to come up with a retail plan," said Eric Iversen, MURA senior planner.

Crandall said within the next month his firm will revise the designs, run cost estimates, evaluate traffic impacts and assess utility lines. A development agreement will be put together in the next month or two, he said.

Bill Hoke, Medford's economic developer and deputy city manager, said the project still must go before the Historic Commission, the Site Plan and Architectural Commission, the Planning Commission and the Medford City Council in public hearings.

Hoke said when it's built, Middleford will economically benefit Medford. "It's good for downtown but it really is good for the community," he said.

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