

Minnesota Design Team leaves Walker area residents with plenty to think about

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(Part 1 of a two-part series)

The Minnesota Design Team's (MDT) three-day visit last weekend gave Walker area residents, especially members of the Healthy Communities Partnership (HCP) effort, plenty to think about in the months to come, as they plan a vision and set goals for the community's future.

Saturday evening at WHA Auditorium, the team presented a wide range of suggestions and possibilities for how to unlock the potential of the Walker area.

"The bones are here"

"You have a great community here," MDT co-leader and moderator Rita Trapp emphasized. "The bones are here; you have a great downtown, natural resources, a great unpolluted lake.

"What can the Design Team do for you? It can help you imagine what you could do and how to capitalize on what you already have."

However, many things the Design Team heard about this weekend were beyond its ability to solve — at least in a few days, she noted. "We had to narrow it down.

"So these suggestions aren't exactly what you should do, but they are examples of what you could do,"

Review

After the city of Walker and four adjacent townships got a \$10,000 planning grant last October from the Initiative Foundation of Little Falls, HCP invited MDT to visit to provide a fresh, professional outside perspective on the area's pluses and minuses, and to help HCP create a shared vision and goals for the future.

The 19 volunteer architects, landscape planners, urban designers and others toured Walker, Shingobee, Leech Lake, Turtle Lake and Pine Lake townships Thursday afternoon and Friday, then spent long hours meeting and talking with community groups and ordinary citizens.

Saturday was spent compiling what they saw and heard into a community presentation that the MDT gave to a full house of area residents at WHA Auditorium later that night.

Input, information

Even before MDT arrived, information-gathering began with a pre-visit analysis of the community's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, done by various groups and community sectors.

Information gathered during Thursday and Friday's tours and community presentations also was analyzed and summarized.

And at Friday night's Great Community Get-Together at Moondance Fairground, around 300 area residents took time to respond to five thought-provoking questions posed by the Design Team.

(This information was also included in the final presentation and is listed along with this article.)

"It must be your vision"

During their talks, Design Team members stressed that the Walker community must create its own vision, not just adopt one the Design Team makes for them. They stressed the importance of making that vision a regional one involving city and townships.

Some of the Design Team comments and suggestions included

- Diversify types of tourist opportunities, including eco-tourism;
- Take pro-active measures to protect natural resources during growth and development activity;

- Identify an overall vision of what people want this community to become, and use that vision as a guideline for any developer's proposals;
- Look for already-existing but untapped opportunities;
- Reuse existing retail buildings, housing stock and infrastructure, where possible, before looking to build something new;
- Consider creating a connected trail network around Leech Lake;
- And much more.

WACC is a first step

Toward the end of Saturday's presentation, Trapp stressed the importance of moving forward with the Walker Area Community Center.

"Your Community Center is one of the first steps you need to take. It's not just for the youth; it's a key, and very important for the future of this community."

By Sept. 1, WACC needs to raise \$600,000 to \$800,000; without it, a \$400,000 Blandin grant will be in jeopardy.

More next week from MDT

In next week's issue, The Pilot-Independent will cover additional MDT comments, including suggestions on the Chase Hotel revitalization project, Ah-Gwah-Ching, city park, city dock, area trails and Highway 371.