

Design Team offers new ideas, recommendations

Gail DeBoer, Staff writer

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(Second of a two-part series on the Minnesota Design Team's June 9-11 visit to the Walker area.)

"I'm one of your tourists," architect Richard Venberg introduced himself, as he opened the Design Team's final presentation June 11 at WHA Auditorium.

"This is an amazing place, but you may not realize the natural resources you've got, right out your back door," he continued. "It's become just part of the backdrop."

Diversified tourism

Calling himself as an eco-tourist who comes to bike, cross-country ski and for Eelpout Festival — "which I still haven't figured out," Venberg posed the question — "How can you get around this area, other than by car or snowmobile?"

His suggestion — use bike trails.

"You see things on bikes at 10 mph that you don't see otherwise," he declared — like swarms of delicate dragonflies the Design Team encountered while on a bike tour.

With Paul Bunyan and Heartland state trails already here, Venberg suggested more links to create a trail encircling Leech. Along the way, information signs could tell about points of interest, history, culture, natural resources and more.

An expanded bike trail is one way to diversify the area's tourist base, co-presenter Rita Trapp elaborated.

"This is a different type of tourism that attracts day trippers and overnight cyclists, hikers and walkers. But there's a need to move people from place to place, so you can use your resources better."

Land use issues

"Your lakes are your jewels," city planning consultant Michael Wozniak declared. "But what you do on the land dictates what the future of the lakes and water will be."

On the issue of growth, he noted it can be orderly or disorderly; controlled or uncontrolled.

Disorderly growth creates expensive infrastructure, encourages sprawl and is visually un-unified.

Orderly growth allows for more economical and efficient services and preserves natural resources.

Nickel and dimed to death

"If you aren't careful," he cautioned, "your forest resources will be nickel and dimed to death! Clear here for a lot, there for a driveway or a stormwater pond, and pretty soon that northwoods feel will be gone. One lot after another; and you'll look just like a city."

Wozniak suggested builders and developers look at clustering houses or other structures, using joint driveways and rethinking how they clear vegetation and manage stormwater.

Joint planning is critical for protecting natural resources. Governments need to communicate up front, instead of complaining later.

"You want to be good neighbors! Don't make it a rarity to talk. Start with informal talks over coffee, but also hold regular meetings. You could create joint powers agreements. And annexation doesn't have to be contentious, with cool heads and common sense."

Priorities

Wozniak also commented on community land use priorities.

- The Walker Industrial Park. "It's a good start, but you need a vision, need to be sure future businesses are appropriate. Look at external and internal street accesses and pedestrian trails. Stormwater management is key anywhere that has large buildings and paved parking areas."

- Walker's downtown. "We see lots of untapped potential. You could intensify use of and better use some existing properties. There are great opportunities here, where infrastructure is already in place."
- Existing housing areas farther from the core. "Protect and maintain the viability of existing housing, voluntarily or through zoning. Affordable housing is easier to accomplish with existing houses than with new."
- New off-lake housing within city limits. "We suggest a mix of housing for young families and an aging population; integrated, not segregated; with proximity to the school, community center."
- Shingobee Island. "This is a prime example of the need for joint planning. Its community wastewater system needs help. You need to discuss land holdings with the Leech Lake Band. It's also close to AGCC and could be part of that renovation."

Developers' plans should further community's vision

"We realize this community has done lots of planning," Trapp said. "But from what we've seen, it doesn't take a regional perspective. We want to make sure you're going where you want to go."

"You need to set your own goals and visions but also to be sure developers with plans understand that their ideas must further your common vision."

AGCC's future

After looking at the reuse master plan created for Ah-Gwah-Ching Center, the soon-to-close state nursing home east of Walker, Moorhead architect Alan Dosert presented suggestions to "reframe some of their conclusions."

"The master plan stops at Shingobee Bay. We think the two are important components; they have connections and relationships."

How could AGCC be reused? Suggestions included

- Health care — a 25-bed critical access hospital; long-term care facility; specialty care.
- Detention center or treatment center; minimum security unit; multi-county correctional facility; for-profit jail.
- Higher education or technology — community college; technology incubator; foreign language village; academic academy.
- Interpretive center(s) run by the Leech Lake Band or Department of Natural Resources.

The group had some concerns with the master plan's recommendations.

"You want to avoid competing developments; not another resort that would compete against the Chase project. A resort also would need lake access that the plan doesn't have. It would need additional land clearing plus demolition and abandonment of structures, and you want to avoid that, if at all possible. Dosert also cautioned against incompatible uses; "not both a resort and a detention center!" which produced audience laughter.

When planning for AGCC's future, MDT encouraged the following

- Reusing existing structures and placing development in existing open spaces, not making new ones. "Why clear-cut more space?" he asked rhetorically. "It's a great campus setting with a history." He also encouraged partnerships between the county, city, Shingobee Township and tribal community for AGCC reuse planning.

Downtown opportunities

"Everything centers on downtown Walker," declared team member Lance Bernard, transportation planner. "How can it be improved? How do you draw people to the waterfront?"

With parks or green spaces at opposite ends of downtown, he suggested a trail system through residential areas to tie them together.

The Design Team also looked at a transportation action model plan created several years ago by the Minnesota Department of Transportation. The plan included options for handling Highway 371 traffic, including a south bypass to separate traffic headed for Walker from through traffic.

If that or another highway alternative was found, it could open Minnesota Avenue to becoming a

pedestrian-scale shopping area with slower traffic, recessed parking, etc.

"What you've got is pretty good, compared to other towns," he stated. Other ideas were more pedestrian crosswalks, more trees, consistent signage, bump-out parking, large store front windows ("very important"), and commercial offices or residences the on second floor above retail stores. Architectural elements on existing buildings should be retained, and new buildings should fit in with those styles.

City park, large potential

Walker city park, the first thing people see when they come into town from the southeast, has some good recreational infrastructure and a large potential. Landscape architect Erica Frizzell suggested adding a visitors' center to accommodate Chamber of Commerce offices, public restrooms, a bike shop or bike rentals.

Although the area has "amazing trails" for walking, biking and roller blading, she said trails are needed that go through the park. Other amenities might be a public fishing pier and a band shell.

"What Walker already has [in its park] is scale, proximity and the right feel. There's just a couple of gaps in the smile!"

Chase Hotel project

During their visit, MDT spoke with developer Steve Olson about his Chase Hotel redevelopment plans.

While acknowledging the plan's good intentions, MDT took issue with some parts of the project. Fifth and Sixth streets are important connections to the lake and should be maintained. (The city has an easement on Sixth right past the Chase to Leech Lake.)

"When downtown, you don't know the lake is there until you get down on Fifth Street," presenter Brady Halvorson said. It's important not to do anything — including street closing or locating a conference center — that would block visual or physical connections to the lake, he stressed.

Area residents also had told MDT they were concerned about less and less lakeshore being accessible to the public, due to development.

"A large part of this project would take away a large part of the public lakeshore," he cautioned. Instead, MDT suggested creating a block-long stretch of public lakeshore between Fifth and Sixth. Other ideas included opening up the proposed development to create a central plaza area; the importance of retaining lakefront dining such as Pepper's, not just a restaurant at the Chase; and pivoting or moving some proposed townhouses to open up the lake view.

"The city may have to do some horse trading with the developer to get what it wants. But you don't want to take what is proposed at face value."

City dock also could be improved to create a wharf-type, small fishing village look. Some team members felt Walker already has a New England fishing village type atmosphere.

"Downtown is a great opportunity for the future," Trapp concluded. "But it takes initiative on the part of the community to decide what you want, and then to communicate that to developers."

Now what?

The greater Walker community has a lot going for it, MDT co-leader Andrew Mack concluded. He encouraged everyone to continue with the Healthy Communities Partnership (HCP) process, to organize and synthesize their thoughts.

The Design Team doesn't expect all of their suggestions to be adopted, Trapp said.

"But I would encourage you to step forward to work on something you're passionate about!"

"We can't afford to let this die."

HCP chair John Fjelstul found it hard to comprehend that a group of people "can come into a community and, in a few hours, do what they've done and explain it.

"This is just the beginning," he predicted. "It may take years to accomplish things, and we may not

agree with everything we heard tonight.

"But this is just the stimulation of thought we need to go forward. We can't afford to just let this die!"