

When you put your heads together, it's easier to see the answer

Guest commentary

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Sometimes it's hard to understand the language of planning. "What's our vision?" asked the Walker Area Partners in the days leading up to the Minnesota Design Team's visit.

Oh, 20-20 with glasses, is how a smart aleck might respond. All of us have a bit of the smart aleck in us: just because it's a hard question and just because people tend to deflect their reluctance to answer hard questions. But, several hundred people sat down together at Moondance Salon June 10 to help answer the question, "What's our vision?" And, amazingly (and probably not surprisingly), the smart alecks were hushed and some pretty neat answers emerged.

The next day, another huge group gathered at the WHA auditorium to see the vision revealed: Leech Lake is our postcard image; young families need jobs with a living wage; we want to be a healthy place to live and to be known as a good place to live; we want to see downtown lively and diverse and the Chase Hotel revitalized and everyone of us can help in our own way. The design team then offered us some filters to use in considering our vision.

Keep the focus on the lake, they said. Practically, this means protecting something we all share — the views of the lake. The view of the lake as you drive into town from the south on 371 is a huge resource. And, it's important that the lake can be viewed as you walk downtown. Emphasize how Fifth Street connects the lake to Main Street. Consider realigning the planned Chase Hotel project to open Sixth Street from Main Street to the lake. That keeps the lake connected to Main Street and it also establishes a trail head for the start of the Paul Bunyan trail.

Designers suggested that the Chase project place a Pepper's-style restaurant outside the hotel, across Fifth Street. That setting is more public, the designers said. Some people might be reluctant to eat in the hotel. Doing so might require a compromise in the city ordinance that limits the height of buildings. But trading building height for a public space on the waterfront benefits the Chase development and the public; that's a good deal.

New development should consider the lake: capturing stormwater runoff to prevent pollution, and building in an orderly way, working from the existing city boundaries outward to minimize the removal of trees and our forest setting.

Another team looked at the Ah-Gwah-Ching master plan and asked some provocative questions. Why consider another resort or conference facility when that's being proposed at the Chase, and there isn't really any shoreland? And, the Ah-Gwah-Ching setting should be extended to include Shingobee Island. There are some needs there — updating the wastewater facility — and an opportunity to partner with the Leech Lake tribe.

Think campus when you consider Ah-Gwah-Ching's future, the design team said. One example is a short-term technology instruction program; we heard about something similar in North Dakota that turns out 20 robotics graduates annually.

The team suggested that Ah-Gwah-Ching could be an academy — such as a peace or conflict resolution center. Our own Karla Berg is a graduate of one such center. Such an academy could provide training to individuals interested in learning conflict resolution or mediation.

It might be a place to address reconciliation between our American Indian and white cultures. Or, how about a more traditional teaching facility? In this column, I've suggested a Leech Lake Institute — a place to apply lessons in biology, chemistry, geology, history or philosophy in an applied setting. I don't know how to accomplish that, but maybe it's like fishing: throw out the bait and see what bites.

It was fun to be part of the design team's activities. The members were enthusiastic and bright. And, it's

flattering to be asked, too. The design team gave us their expertise and suggested ways to proceed, but they emphasized that the concepts were ours. That's the antidote to everyone who thinks that getting involved isn't worth the energy. Everyone doesn't agree about everything — especially the smart alecks! — but the weekend helped us discover the things we agree on and how to achieve those things. The Walker Area Partners has the large job of moving the ideas along. Some will fall by the wayside; some can easily be accomplished. Some will take years. Everyone who participated said they should volunteer. Now's the time to make good on that pledge.

Volunteering doesn't have to be difficult or uncomfortable. It could be as simple as remembering we want to keep the focus on the lake and asking a local official or developer how this project or initiative helps us keep the focus on the lake.

The real value from the weekend is the collective wisdom that emerged. The design team did a lot of work but they said we provided "the bones" — the place, the people and the vision. We learned the power of working together.

Molly MacGregor lives in Walker and will be writing a regular column for The Pilot-Independent about our community, taking a closer look at some of the events and issues that concern us.