

Minnesota Design Team makes last official visit to Leech Lake area

One recommendation: an annual community-wide meeting

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Five Minnesota Design Team (MDT) members offered compliments and recommendations Saturday morning during a meeting at WHA School with about 18 Walker Area Partners (WAP) volunteers, city council members and others.

The visit concludes a process that began last June when about 20 MDT professionals (architects, engineers, city planners and others) made a three-day visit to Walker and surrounding area.

The Design Team was invited as part of the Healthy Communities Partnership process to help area residents gain a better perspective of the community's strengths, weaknesses, what could be done and how to plan for the future.

WAP chair John Fjelstul and others reviewed what's been happening since June. Their reports touched on these topics.

- WAP structural reorganization and communications efforts;
- Walker Area Community Center (WACC) fund-raising success and groundbreaking;
- Downtown beautification;
- Improved highway signage and recreation trail linkages;
- Possible consolidation of Cass County, Walker and Ah-Gwah-Ching museums;
- Health care task force's three-phase, 10-year plan for a medical care campus and long-term care facility (possibly at AGCC) and critical care hospital somewhere in the area;
- Leech Lake Fishing Task Force's success in getting increased walleye stocking for the lake;
- Visitor Information Center at city park (a long-term goal);
- Pedestrian downtown area with possible highway re-route for truck traffic (another long-term goal);
- Chase Hotel renovation project now moving ahead;
- Improved cooperation between Walker and surrounding townships;
- Walker Industrial Park expansion; and
- Possible expansion of the Walker airport.

MDT members Andrew Mack, Rita Trapp, Richard Venberg, James Dean and Erica Frizzell offered their comments.

Trapp and Mack commended WAP's efforts to keep the community updated with its new quarterly newsletter, Web site and news articles. Trapp noted that supporting other groups' efforts, like the WACC, is a good avenue to take. It's not necessary for WAP to take the lead in everything.

"You seem to be doing so much at one time," she commended.

"I do have some concerns about having short-term successes that you can show people. It's hard for them to get behind long-term plans, if they don't see short-term accomplishments to keep them encouraged."

Mack reminded the group of MDT's proposal for a pedestrian-friendly downtown area in Walker. With the Chase Hotel renovation and other projects moving forward, Mack urged WAP to form a "champion committee" to try to coordinate a variety of projects being considered by

other entities, such as any future plans the Department of Transportation might have for Highway 371, and county courthouse expansion options.

Architect James Dean encouraged the group to save and reuse its historic buildings.

"A few years ago, we studied 75 or 80 towns that MDT has visited," he reviewed. "At every one, we recommended they save their old buildings. Turns out, none of them did! They're parking lots now."

AGC, the soon-to-close state nursing home near Walker, "is not just a collection of old buildings!" he emphasized. "It'd be very sad to see you tear those down. You need to find a use for those buildings; if not a health care facility, then a museum. AGC buildings are useable! You can save money and time there or elsewhere."

Venberg recalled the "postcard of Walker" that participants created at the June meetings.

Environmental connections and fishing were important components, and the fishing task force has been successful in that regard.

He encouraged more citizen involvement and a focus on other natural resources and environmental strengths beyond fishing.

As far as creating an attractive, pedestrian-friendly downtown that will draw people back, Venberg urged the group not to wait for the Chase project but to "keep the ball rolling" with interim projects that will still tie together.

Trapp and Mack stressed the importance of maintaining pedestrian links between the lake and downtown into the Chase project.

Frizzell, Trapp and Mack strongly suggested WAP hold an annual community gathering like last year's successful free fish fry prior to the MDT visit.

The gathering would give WAP a chance to update everyone on progress, gather new input and keep the community engaged. Fjelstul said it was very likely WAP will hold such an event.

Every planning process requires funding, whether it comes from fund-raising activities or from grants, Dean said. Don't be discouraged if you apply for grants and get turned down the first few times.

"You are moving in the right direction," Trapp echoed. "But you need to be patient."