

Walker looks at ways to improve city

By **MONICA LUNDQUIST**
Cass County Correspondent

WALKER - Walker probably will never be as big as Brainerd or Bemidji, but there's something nice about staying small, said Walker Area Partners chair John Fjelstul.

He reflected in a recent interview on the difference planning now can make for that city and surrounding area toward achieving goals in the near and far future and for a community's long-term survival.

The city's downtown lies along Highway 371, hemmed in on one side by Leech Lake and on the other by a massive hill, which primarily has residential development.

Walker Area Partners grew out of work begun in the fall of 2004, said Fjelstul. The city of Walker obtained a \$10,000 Initiative Foundation Grant to complete a Healthy Communities Initiative analysis. The community used part of that grant to engage Minnesota Design Team guidance in the planning process.

Neighboring townships of Shingobee, Turtle Lake, Leech Lake and Pine Lake joined the process.

It has improved communication within the community, said Fjelstul, and added plans to those already under way to improve the city and surrounding area in the face of a shift away from small, family resorts to seasonal homes. Tourism will always be important to Walker despite this change, he added.

On the design team's first visit with about 20 professionals in June 2005, 300 area residents turned out to begin the visioning process. Since then, Walker Area Partners has worked to refine plans for future projects and add more support to existing projects in the planning stages, said Fjelstul. The design team made a final visit this winter.



Walker's city dock (above) could one day look more like the illustration below, which is on the Walker Area Partners Web site.
Monica Lundquist

"Nothing ever gets started if you don't plan," he said, adding he may not live to see all the goals reached, but expects they will be reached if people here keep working on ways to bring them to reality. "A lot of people are willing to work on it if they know what the plan is."

Short-term realizations Fjelstul expects include decoratively designed Walker city identifications signs, creating a friendly atmosphere for people who come to the community, improving the city park with better public restrooms and supporting efforts begun before the planning project.

Ongoing projects include a private development working to restore the Chase Hotel and install condominiums adjacent to it. That is in city permitting and land acquisition stages. A Walker Community Center (including an ice arena), after several years of committee fund-raising, hopes to break ground this spring.

Another ongoing project involves the reuse of Ah-Gwah-Ching. Cass County has been negotiating with the state to obtain the property. Benedictine Health Services has evaluated prospects for building a long-term care center, clinic and critical access hospital there.

The community has been successful in obtaining more Minnesota DNR walleye stocking last year and this year for Leech Lake to improve fisheries.

Long-term planning projects include doing a housing survey and addressing how to get more affordable housing in the area for working families and seeking ways to improve job opportunities.

Walker Area Partners plans to meet with Minnesota Department of Transportation officials to request an eventual truck route around the city, so the downtown can be made more pedestrian-friendly. Design Team representatives also suggested making one street through the city one way in one direction and another one way in the other direction to improve traffic flow for passenger vehicles. Downtown beautification could be part of this.

Walker Area Partners would like to see the city, county and Ah-Gwah-Ching historical museums combined on one large museum space, possibly at Ah-Gwah-Ching.

Recreational trails connecting other cities with the Walker area currently do not come directly into the city. Fjelstul said they will work toward obtaining more direct connections and possibly expand existing trails to circle Leech Lake.

The city's chamber of commerce is in the same building as city hall. Parking there is difficult for people hauling a trailer. Fjelstul said Walker Area Partners would like to create a visitor center across the street in the city park. It may cost \$1 million, but there are state and federal grants available toward funding it, he said.

Work is under way to seek grants to expand the Walker Airport. With a longer runway, larger planes could land close to the city, said Fjelstul. Currently, people flying larger planes have to land in Brainerd or Bemidji and drive to Walker.

Further expanding the Walker Industrial Park is also on the agenda.

There currently are subcommittees working toward each of these goals. Walker Area Partners meets monthly and also meets monthly with the four townships. Several community committees have been assigned to work toward one or more of the goals.

It will take planning on how the goal logistically can be reached and identifying ways to fund each project before Walker Area Partners can take each proposal to a government agency to seek its support, said Fjelstul. That process is under way, he said.