

INTRODUCTION

The Downtown Community Partnership (DCP) of Fargo, North Dakota, in partnership with the Office of Mayor Dennis Walaker sponsored a day long workshop to discuss the future of development in the downtown shopping district. This joint effort enlisted property owners, business owners and other community stakeholders to participate in a planning retreat for the purpose of formulating strategies which will ensure the quality of future development in the downtown district. Members of this group, which included City planning staff, representatives from North Dakota State University (NDSU), local financiers and arts/cultural advocates, joined in the workshop facilitated by HDR consultants, to create a framework for the next generation of downtown development activities.

PURPOSE

The intent of this “ad hoc” planning group was to identify and memorialize basic principles of downtown development that are most desired for future implementation in the commercial district of Fargo, North Dakota. The participants were all stakeholders in the district’s viability and were either presently invested and/or seeking future development opportunities. The goal of the workshop was to build upon the previous plans and visioning exercises, and to utilize this basis to create a bridge or framework plan which articulates a direction of consensus for both the public and the private sector. Given recent momentum in development activities and the desire to ensure quality and steady growth, the group brainstormed about catalyst activities that should be the joint stewardship of the investment community and the planning and economic development entities of the City of Fargo, North Dakota.

STRUCTURE

The workshop consisted of a strategic planning exercise which began in the morning with a SWOT analysis of the current downtown district’s development environment. Strengths and Weaknesses, both internal and external, as well as Opportunities and Threats were elicited from the group in a dynamic capture session. The afternoon objective was to leverage this analysis in the formulation of guiding principles for future development. Goal statements which would incorporate the inherent positive trends and perceived threats were crafted into tenants of future collaborative development initiatives. The session concluded with a break-out session which enabled the definition of actionable items to address and implement the guiding principles. Four distinct groups sorted the action items into the “Main Street” categories: Economic Restructuring, Design, Promotion and Organization.

Summary of Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths:

The group of stakeholders expressed a great deal of positive opinion with respect to the hard work of the DCP, Mayor Dennis Walaker, and the high level of local involvement by the business and development community. The group relayed that the community “staying power”, overall quality of life, as well as the downtown’s sense of place and its unique identity has materially contributed to the recent development momentum. The group rated and weighted the community strengths and identified the following as the most critical to success of the downtown district:

1. Three Universities are long term institutional stakeholders
2. MeritCare healthcare campus is strong economic driver
3. Private investment community is very engaged in redevelopment activities
4. Creative arts organizations are numerous and active
5. Fargo, North Dakota has a “funky” local and national persona

Weaknesses:

The group exhibited remarkable consensus as to the perceived limitations of the downtown development environment. The unpredictable nature of the Red River was delineated as a singular factor in the overall interests of district redevelopment. This element is further compounded by the multiplicity of jurisdictions governing the management of the river. Access to the downtown and vehicular circulation and parking also surfaced as a common concern for the participants. The collaboration between the City and potential investors was deemed tentative. Consistent, clear and concise communication between the two was lacking. Participants cited the following weaknesses as most damaging to the revitalization of the downtown area:

1. City bureaucracy is difficult to navigate and perceived as oppositional
2. Provision and management of parking is a dilemma for both public/private sector
3. N.P. railroad right of way represents a physical barrier to pedestrian and vehicular circulation
4. Investment incentives are either inadequate or not well publicized or both

Summary of Opportunities and Threats

Opportunities:

Major infrastructure improvements were envisioned as critical opportunities for the health and vitality of the downtown district. The abandonment of one track of the N.P. line was suggested to create better vehicular access to downtown. The Mid-America property if redeveloped was foreseen as the impetus for revitalization of the entire riverfront, and the NDSU campus as a catalyst to create "Off"- Broadway development opportunities for housing, retail and the arts. The outlook of the group was that the critical mass of activity had been achieved, and that now was the opportunity to create public private partnerships for major infrastructure improvements. The fundamental opportunities that were articulated are as follows:

- 1) NDSU Business School campus will spur ancillary development downtown
- 2) Economic incentives can enhance development quality
- 3) Mid-America Steel is a complicated and critical riverfront opportunity
- 4) Public private partnerships should be utilized to maximize redevelopment potential

Threats:

Participants recognized that time is of the essence for downtown redevelopment opportunities. Consensus that the City may be at its economic peak and that the development community is not sufficiently in sync to leverage the current favorable conditions. There was also a concern that public relations missteps could prove deleterious to continued growth and that concerted effort should be extended to preempt this possibility. The threats that were delineated as being of most concern are as follows:

- 1) Media perception must be collaboratively managed
- 2) Synergy for downtown as "developer friendly" must be nurtured and maintained
- 3) Problematic site/property assembly must be addressed by the municipality

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Based on the SWOT analysis the assembled stakeholders devised a set of guiding principles and placed them into each of the four “Main Street” categories. Each guiding principle consists of a measurable statement that includes quantifying and/or qualifying criteria to determine a means of measuring progress, performance, and milestones of the concepts and plans.

Design

The N.P. Railway line is a barrier/opportunity to create fluid access and circulation for the downtown district.

Development activity should be concentrated along the riverfront to further a connection between downtown Moorhead, MN and downtown Fargo, ND.

Organization

City Hall interface with the development community must become a collaborative effort with a standardized process for a formal and predictable review system.

An atmosphere of readiness to capitalize on opportunities among public and private entities should be formalized into partnerships to encourage downtown investment.

Promotion

Foster awareness of Fargo’s funky and unique identity.

Attract and Retain vibrant and unique independent retailers in the downtown district.

Economic Restructuring

Develop partnerships amongst stakeholders (academic, health, arts, retail) to deliver economic vitality to the redevelopment of downtown.

Determine impact and integration of NDSU students, faculty and staff downtown.

ACTION ITEMS

The action items are to be employed throughout the planning process to maintain clear and measurable targets by all the participants, to develop strategies and to evaluate all proposed ideas, concepts, and plans. The stakeholder group determined the following list of actions items, as part of an ongoing planning and development process, but which could ideally be significantly implemented within a six-month period:

Design

1. The City of Fargo has initiated a design study for the relocation of the N.P. Railway line, this should be expedited and include a cost benefit analysis for the railroad and the community.
2. The City of Fargo needs to work with the jurisdictional entities concerned to implement flood control measures for the Red River that will endorse significant private investment in riverfront development.
3. A feasibility study should be undertaken for the relocation of City Hall through a public private partnership. The study should focus on leveraging City assets so that new development within the riverfront corridor will be fostered.

Economic Restructuring

1. The DCP should assemble a task force to identify priority sites for redevelopment (Mid-America, Union Storage, various surface parking lots, etc.) and conduct a thorough market assessment of these sites.
2. The DCP should work with the NDSU Business School to establish a workforce development initiative with local businesses which could include internships, promotional, seasonal opportunities, etc. to engage local students in the downtown business district.
3. A market study to gauge the impact of the NDSU downtown campus with respect to housing, general retail, dining/food, and arts/entertainment venues should be accomplished by the NDSU.

Organization

1. The DCP and Economic Development Commission (EDC) should work closely with the Mayor's Office and City Planning Officials to create an illustrative guide to TIF districts as well as a guidebook/road map to the financial incentives available to the business and development community.
2. The City of Fargo and in particular the City planning officials should further formalize and codify development and design standards for the downtown district.
3. The Office of the Mayor should structure an inter-departmental unit within his office which is designated to fostering cooperation between city departments in collaborating with the development community. The charge of this office would be to identify roadblocks to the execution of development projects and to expedite a targeted approach to resolve issues – a one-stop-shop for city involvement in significant scale redevelopment projects.
4. The DCP/EDC should establish a vetting process and/or provide services designed to package development proposals for quality assurance and public support in anticipation of and prior to their presentation to the City of Fargo.

Promotion

1. A committee should undertake the stewardship of promotional activities to accomplish area marketing of the downtown district as a “Fun and Funky” place to shop, live and work. Initial activities shall include:
 - a. Engage a public relations professional to design a “Fun and Funky Fargo” campaign strategy
 - b. Create a special events task force to plan and promote a calendar of business and arts-oriented events.
2. Coordinate with NDSU to establish a Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at the downtown campus to accomplish business attraction and retention, in conjunction with the maintenance of a commercial property inventory.

CONCLUSION

From a strong historic district with pedestrian-friendly and vibrant street life to a growing university campus and an expanding healthcare provider, Fargo, North Dakota has distinguished itself from the field in the strength and diversity of its downtown community.

Stakeholders have organized an interest in building upon these strengths through continued downtown investment. This marks a timely organizational opportunity for both the City and the downtown investment community. In the spirit of cooperation, this Guiding Principles Workshop sought to build on previous downtown plans by articulating the current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; weigh them, one against the other; and prioritize near term activities which can be catalysts for future, quality development downtown.

The workshop group articulated several overarching principles:

1. Removal of both physical and organizational barriers to quality design and development
2. Continue efforts to guide river front design and development
3. Capitalize on the growing interest in downtown development by employing strategic public private partnerships which include not only City government and the investment community, but the arts, health, and commercial stakeholders as well.
4. Clear and concise public relations surfaced as an important tool for all to employ strategically and in an organized fashion.

Action items developed by the group are specific and measurable. They focus on the goal of near-term achievement. To ensure successful implementation, each action item should be assigned to a stakeholder who is capable of and willing to take on the task. Regularly scheduled meetings at predefined intervals should be established to specifically follow-up on progress, discuss relevant issues, and evaluate how achieving a milestone can be a catalyst for further work.