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After Assembly setback, businesses wonder how to breathe new life into downtown Fairbanks

by Molly Rettig / mrettig@newsminer.com
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FAIRBANKS — The Downtown Association is rethinking how to revamp downtown Fairbanks after two fundamental pieces of its plan failed.



The Fairbanks North Star Borough Assembly rejected new zoning standards Thursday designed to improve the business climate downtown, saying they were too restrictive.

Several months ago, city planners dropped a proposal to convert Cushman and Barnette streets to two-way traffic. Both were proposals to implement Vision Fairbanks, a long-term plan to spur investment and attract visitors downtown, as many businesses and services have left the city center.

“Zoning and roads are the two things government does to give downtown some new features to compete with,” said David van den Berg, executive director of the Downtown Association.

The zones would have encouraged retail stores with big windows and sidewalk entrances in lieu of things like auto shops and giant parking lots in the core of downtown, such as the one on Fifth Avenue and Cushman. The rest of the plan would be market-driven and would flow from there.

Without these tools, downtown property and business owners are now looking at other options, like an upcoming beautification project, a potential downtown service area and individual efforts.

“We still want to bring more property owners downtown. We’re probably going to turn inward since we keep getting kicked at all government levels,” said Chris Miller, a downtown property owner and board member of the Downtown Association.

Miller said downtown owners may form a group, similar to a service area, that taxes itself for specific services.

“It’s done as an all-inclusive whole, instead of me deciding to plow my sidewalk and somebody else deciding not to plow theirs, so my business suffers,” he said.

Enhancing the streetscape is another idea to make downtown more pedestrian friendly. The city is pursuing the \$6-million project (called a “complete street”)

as an alternative to the two-way conversion.

The project aims to make Cushman and Barnette streets more inviting to pedestrians, cyclists and others. It could include making Cushman two lanes, adding parking, planting trees along the road, widening sidewalks, raising crosswalks and many other possibilities. It could replace the traffic light at Fifth and Cushman with a four-way stop sign.

“I’m excited about it because it works on the infrastructure, plus makes it very aesthetically pleasing,” said City Mayor Jerry Cleworth.

The city will open public comment on the project this summer.

Miller said it would only work if it incorporated ideas from businesses and took a big-picture view, like Vision Fairbanks.

“If it’s a patchwork of stuff, it doesn’t make sense. If you’ve got raised sidewalks in this part, and striped sidewalks over here and signalized sidewalks over here, it’s still not any better,” he said.

Construction should begin next summer, Cleworth said.

Cleworth, a vocal critic of Vision Fairbanks, opposed both new zones and two-way streets, mainly because they were too expensive. He wants to attract development downtown (especially a grocery store), but not through the government, he said.

“I think the job of the city is to provide the best infrastructure that we can and try to keep taxes as stable as possible, and let the private sector take over from there,” he said.

He doesn’t support tax incentives to bring new businesses downtown, one suggestion by Borough Assemblyman Matt Want last week.

“When you start off giving businesses something that may compete with an existing business, we create a problem,” he said.

Sheri Olesen, owner of Chartreuse, said beautifying downtown was key.

“I believe that downtown, in order to be successful, needs art,” she said. “It doesn’t have to be expensive. I redid this entire store on a small budget.”

She was disappointed the new zoning failed but had other ideas for improving the district.

The Downtown Association could offer classes on increasing sales, design standards and other business topics, she said. She and other young business owners have been trying to draw people in with events like an outdoor Sweating Honey concert and a winter solstice gala last year.

“It’s up to each individual business owner to put forth their best effort,” she said.

“I think in 10 years, if I give it everything I have and everybody else does too, it’ll be a booming downtown.”

Contact staff writer Molly Rettig at 459-7590.

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