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BCU seeks downtown input

*Barrett Newkirk
The Enquirer*

After encountering resistance to some aspects of its plan for downtown, Battle Creek Unlimited will increase efforts in coming weeks to gather more feedback from city residents about what they want to see in the center of the Cereal City.

The new approach will include encouraging people to submit their thoughts through Web sites, including Facebook, and more direct interaction with residents at neighborhood meetings.

The campaign will be led by Julie Metea, a public relations professional in the process of moving her firm, MessageCoach, to Battle Creek from the Detroit area.

"If we're going to do this for this community, for this client, we need to move downtown," Metea said Wednesday.

Her firm has been working with BCU for years and was involved in the November unveiling of the new plan for downtown, Metea said. But while there has been a lot of action from BCU since then, she said, there has not been enough communication with the public.

Jim Hettinger, former BCU director and now a consultant for the downtown plan, said he expects to have a thorough public input process with meetings before neighborhood organizations and other groups. He's set to speak to the Calhoun County Board of Commissioners tonight.

Along with changing the look of downtown, BCU's plan includes expanding the city's educational facilities and the opening of an international food safety research site.

It also includes a new office building for the Kellogg Co., a project originally set to begin this spring but which since has been delayed.

"It has not hurt us that much," Hettinger said of Kellogg's decision to wait on the new building.

The site for the future Kellogg building is Festival Market Place, the brick plaza at McCamly and Jackson streets.

To replace the plaza, BCU has considered demolishing four structures at the corner of McCamly and Michigan Avenue for a new riverfront public place, an idea that upset some residents who believed the buildings should be preserved.

BCU now is considering other options for the new plaza site, in addition to the corner of McCamly and Michigan.

Hettinger said one site being considered is green space adjacent to the former Cereal City USA building, although he said it is close to being too far from the McCamly Plaza Hotel to be seen as a walkable destination for hotel guests.

Another possibility is working with Battle Creek Area Catholic Schools and incorporating the plaza into its planned renovation either on school property or an adjacent site.

Hettinger said the new plaza should be thought of as a meeting space, not a traditional park.

Critics of the plan have said downtown Battle Creek already has enough park space.

"We're not talking about swing sets and seesaws, a drunk sitting on a bench and trash cans filled with Sunday picnics," Hettinger said.

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Additional Facts

Give them your ideas

Battle Creek Unlimited is encouraging people to submit their ideas for the downtown transformation either by logging onto Facebook at www.facebook.com/cerealcity, or e-mailing Cheryl Beard at beard@bcunlimited.org.
