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Concepts for B.C. streets unveiled

Elizabeth Willis
The Enquirer

A crowd gathered Thursday to witness the unveiling of three downtown infrastructure concepts created based on community input.

Designers Kerri Bennett with BETA Design and consultant Pat Cornelisse of Cornelisse Design Associates presented the drawings Thursday to a lunch crowd of nearly 100 at the Burnham Brook Community Center, on the western edge of downtown Battle Creek.

A month earlier, the designers and Battle Creek Unlimited, the city's economic development arm, gathered infrastructure priorities from area residents.

They found that while people believed the downtown was generally clean, safe and walkable, there was little to attract visitors, Bennett said. Empty storefronts and visibly decaying buildings detracted from the city's amenities, such as its river, parks and linking trails.

An overall plan is in place to transform the downtown by attracting food safety-related businesses and increasing educational opportunities, however, changing the infrastructure proved to be an initially contentious element.

So a public meeting was held to continue gathering input on the three design concepts before combining the best ideas into one plan.

The first design, dubbed the illuminating concept, emphasized creative lighting technologies to add interest and movement to the city's streets.

Nods of approval came as Bennett described a small park space where outdoor seating and wireless Internet access could be bordered by a semi-translucent wall on which images could be displayed or games played.

The second showed a wave design influenced by the city's downtown river.

"You're so lucky that the riverfront is a block away," Bennett said.

Cornelisse proposed setting multi-colored paving stones in undulating patterns along the sidewalks and crosswalks. An interactive park could incorporate wave-like play structures or murals and sculptures by local artists.

The third concept made shade a priority with the installation of manmade "tree-brellas" and rows of low planters that would add height and depth to what is now a very flat appearance downtown, Bennett said. A wall of green plants would add movement without adding potentially sign-obstructing trees.

"Something like that catches the eye and looks like movement," Bennett said. "All of this is to attract

people and give people an image of downtown."

Participants submitted surveys describing what they loved or hated the most in each design. They were encouraged to pick and choose elements from each of the designs.

While some designs might concentrate on the intersections, others would extend along Michigan and its side streets from Carlyle Street to North Division Street, said Karl Dehn, BCU president and chief executive officer.

Dehn stressed in his opening speech that the project is in the concept stage and still very flexible.

"These are just visual tools to engage the discussion," he said.

During a question-and-answer session, a couple of people expressed concerns about the cost of the project, and where the money would come from.

Dehn said much of that will be decided as feasibility and cost estimates are completed.

Jim Hettinger, senior consultant to BCU, later said the budget would be in the millions and partially funded through a W.K. Kellogg Foundation grant in support of the downtown transformation plan.

Others wanted to know if heated sidewalks were a part of the plan. Bennett replied that they are still being discussed, but that they can be very expensive to install and maintain.

Local businessman Mark Jones said the designs presented were only useful in June and July, when Michiganders walk outdoors.

"I challenge you to ask, what would it look like on Feb. 1," he said.

The designers countered that the concepts are used in other four-season climates without problem.

Former city mayor and downtown business owner John Godfrey asked if lighted planters could be used. Cornelisse answered that it is possible, but that they are prone to vandalism.

"I'm not saying no," she said. "We can do it."

None of the designs specifically pointed to Battle Creek's rich history as the home of cereal entrepreneurs W.K. Kellogg and C.W. Post. Realtor John Wright said he would like that to be a priority moving forward.

"I hope that they really stress our heritage with the design so that when visitors come to Battle Creek, they know it's Battle Creek," he said.

Most people applauded the idea to improve downtown infrastructure and appreciated the city incorporating public suggestions.

"I'm excited to see this process moving in a forward direction," downtown resident Laura Adams said.

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Additional Facts

On AccessVision

The 94-minute downtown infrastructure design concept presentation will air on AccessVision (Ch. 17/917) at the following times:

- 5 p.m. Saturday
 - 9 p.m. Monday
 - 6 p.m. Wednesday
 - Noon Jan. 23
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