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Downtown plan gets scrutinized

Commissioners learn redevelopment proposal

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Battle Creek city commissioners got more information Thursday about decisions they will likely make in 2010 regarding the city's major redevelopment plan for downtown.

Projects like a new rental development, a street closure, a downtown event venue and the relocation of the Battle Creek Family YMCA will all hinge on commission votes expected in the coming months.

Six of the city's nine commissioners participated in a workshop Thursday with leaders from the city, Battle Creek Unlimited and agencies with roles in the downtown plan.

Spearheaded by BCU, the \$85 million downtown redevelopment plan includes an expansion of Kellogg Co.'s downtown presence, the relocation of the Battle Creek Area Math and Science Center, the growth of the new National Center for Food Protection, infrastructure improvements and other projects.

The workshop was held the same day that BCU hosted four meetings seeking public input on the future look of downtown.

One possible change would be the closing of a segment of Jackson Street next to Kellogg's headquarters.

City Manager Ken Tsuchiyama said the company has expressed an interest in gaining easier access for its employees moving between its main building and 67 W. Michigan Ave., which Kellogg is planning to lease.

Tsuchiyama said traffic impact from the closure would be minimal and a study showed the street sees fewer than 1,500 vehicles a day.

To keep easy access to the parking lot on Jackson, Tsuchiyama said another entrance from Michigan Avenue could be created by going through Horse Park, the open space to the east of Shrank's Cafeteria.

Karl Dehn, president and chief executive officer of BCU, said his agency has looked at the possibility of getting a new residential development at Michigan and Carlyle Street, which would also affect traffic in that part of downtown.

Dehn said the rental development project could start construction by late 2010. BCU had unsuccessfully marketed the property as a condominium development.

Dehn said BCU is still looking at property for a new downtown event site and hoped to have a location picked sometime in 2010.

At their first January meeting, commissioners likely will vote on the development agreement with the YMCA, setting in motion the YMCA's planned move to the city-owned Full Blast facility.

The workshop included a review of BCU's efforts to gather public input for the downtown plan, which some city residents have criticized.

Dehn said BCU has spoken to more than 25 groups with crowds ranging from 15 to 200 people.

Tsuchiyama said as the city continued to work though the plan, it will continue to seek public input when appropriate, and he explained why he felt residents complained of the city's and BCU's approach.

"That was ripe for criticism," he said, "because you have to start somewhere, and to do something that's this far-reaching, you have to have some pieces that you throw out there or people won't understand the magnitude of what you're trying to do."

Some commissioners praised the work done so far.

"I think we have gone above and beyond what we typically do for outreach and public comment," Vice Mayor Chris Simmons said, "although the scope of this project is typically larger than what we act on as a commission."

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