

Downtown plan hits halfway mark

Elizabeth Willis • *The Enquirer* • June 9, 2010

Downtown development is coming into sharper focus with continued renovation for new and expanding businesses, modern infrastructure improvements and food safety progress.

Battle Creek economic and food safety developers gave a midpoint overview of the city's downtown revitalization plan Tuesday at the Battle Creek Area Chamber of Commerce Eye Opener event.

Karl Dehn, Battle Creek Unlimited president and chief executive officer, said it has been about 18 months since the three-year transformation plan was announced, though he expects future investments will continue for many years.

During that 18-month period, Kellogg Co. announced it will lease most of two multi-story buildings downtown, moving 600 employees from Porter Street offices to the city center. The Hinman Co., which owns the two buildings at 67 and 70 W. Michigan Ave., is investing about \$4 million into each of the landmark structures.

Covance Inc., a company that contracts with Kellogg to test food, chose to locate a new laboratory in Battle Creek. It is investing \$14.5 million in the former SEMCO Energy building at 55 E. Hamblin Ave., Dehn said.

Plans to move the Battle Creek Area Math and Science Center downtown have been stalled by a lack of funding, but Dehn said backers are continuing to pursue public and private dollars.

Stephen Benoit, president and chief operating officer of the Global Food Protection Institute, formerly the National Center for Food Protection, also said its food safety work is expanding.

Its International Food Protection Training Institute at 49 W. Michigan Ave. recently partnered with federal officials to train first responders to identify oil-contaminated seafood in the Gulf Coast. A technology accelerator also has begun selling state-of-the-art pathogen testing kits.

Dehn said these business developments, paired with a plan to upgrade roads, lighting and architecture along Michigan Avenue and side streets from Carlyle Street to Division Street, have attracted new business interests including three diverse restaurant options.

"We have a lot of interest right now in potential retail downtown," Dehn said. He declined to say which locations the restaurants were considering occupying.

At the meeting, Dehn unveiled detailed street designs, including illuminated wave-shaped benches, an arch at the northern entrance of the Riverwalk Centre parking lot, and a side view of the proposed pocket park on the southeast corner of Michigan and McCamly.

The arch would incorporate green plants and artwork, possibly including some of the detailed medallions that will be first places along arches on M-66 to be built this year, Dehn said.

In addition to the downtown developments, construction crews recently began erecting structural steel at the Toda America Inc. lithium-ion battery components plant along Dickman Road in the Fort Custer Industrial Park.

"I don't know about you, but when I see steel go up like that I get goose bumps," Dehn said.

Elizabeth Willis can be reached at 966-0684 or ewillis@gannett.com.