

## Downtown redux, year 2

### Public forum provides a few answers

Elizabeth Willis • *The Enquirer* • November 11, 2010

Two years into a plan to revitalize downtown Battle Creek, there are about as many questions as there are answers.

A public forum Wednesday evening attracted about 150 people who were curious about the transformation progress.

Battle Creek Unlimited, the economic developer spearheading the initiative, along with Project 20/20, a nonprofit supporting community dialogue, hosted the event at Burnham Brook Community Center.

Rich and Sandy Lam examined samples of brick, stone, tile and lighting that will be used in the downtown's new streetscape design.

"I think it's good," Rich Lam said. "We're both excited about the transformation."

Kaytee Faris, 32, who recently moved back to Battle Creek from Ann Arbor, said she was concerned that some of the street elements were too trendy, but she wasn't there to criticize.

"I see a lot of the aesthetics, but I'm interested in the meat and potatoes," she said.

Improved streets, expanded educational opportunities, a strong Kellogg Co. presence and an emphasis on food safety are key elements of the downtown revitalization.

BCU was spurred to revitalize the downtown because, generally, the first point of contact for visitors is a city's center, said Jim Hettinger, BCU senior advisor.

"As your downtown looks, so your community will appear," he said.

After two years of work, many of the changes have only become visible this fall, said Karl Dehn, BCU president and chief executive officer.

The International Food Protection Training Institute recently gained recognition from the Food and Drug

Administration for creating a standardized training program for food safety and public health professionals, said Stephen Benoit, an IFPTI and Global Food Protection Institute board member. It trained more than 1,100 people in its first year.

Kellogg Co. is in the process of moving about 600 employees downtown from its offices on Porter Street.

Covance Inc. has opened a two-story laboratory in the former SEMCO Energy Building on Hamblin Avenue where it will provide food testing services to Kellogg and other companies while offering internships to local students.

Susan Buckham, representing the company, said if all goes well Covance plans to open a second shift.

"What that means is continued growth and job creation in Battle Creek," she said.

Streets are being closed and opened around the Kellogg Co. to create a walkable environment for its employees.

"That corporate campus is now coming to life and we are very pleased," Dehn said.

Other aspects of the plan have yet to take shape.

The Battle Creek Area Math and Science Center is still seeking funding to expand its unique school downtown where it will have easier access to collaborate with Kellogg and Covance.

Battle Creek Public Schools Superintendent Linda Hicks said beginning next year the district will make science, technology, engineering and math a top priority for students from pre-kindergarten to 12th grade.

"We are going to create this state-of-the-art school and give our kids world-class experiences," she said.

Areas of blight continue to plague the downtown when considering the poor maintenance of its unoccupied buildings, Hettinger said.

Attendees were asked to weigh in on three topics that will help move plans forward: blight, downtown amenities and an events plaza.

Several people said they believed building owners should be held accountable for letting their structures fall into disrepair. Demolition was not seen as a good solution in all circumstances.

Newton Township's Patt Brown, 83, said she was against tearing down old buildings simply to make way for new development.

Others said they wanted a proposed events plaza to have multiple functions that could be used throughout the year.

An overwhelming number of people said they believed entertainment -- such as theater, arts, culture and restaurants -- would attract people downtown.

"I'm hoping that it does something to stabilize Battle Creek and somehow this brings in jobs," Battle Creek's Marjorie Suggs, 58, said. "Something has to happen."

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