

Leaders hope revitalization is sustainable

Elizabeth Willis • *The Enquirer* • September 23, 2010

Community leaders are excited about the city's downtown revitalization plan -- as long as the improvements are sustainable.

That's what they told Karl Dehn, president and chief executive officer of the plan's lead organization Battle Creek Unlimited, after he presented an overview of the downtown transformation plan Wednesday in a crowded conference room at the Burnham Brook Community Center.

Leaders in business, nonprofits and downtown residents interested in developing a vibrant downtown attended the public meeting hosted by Project 20/20, an organization whose vision is to encourage people to live, work and invest in the Battle Creek area.

It has been nearly two years since the revitalization plan was unveiled in November 2008 to develop a healthy urban center that focuses on four main areas: food protection, Kellogg Co. support, education and walkable infrastructure.

"We want to make Battle Creek a place where people want to go," Dehn said.

Two organizations working in food safety have already committed to the area.

Covance Inc., a company that contracts to do food testing services for Kellogg, has nearly completed a \$14.5 million renovation to the former SEMCO Energy building at 55 E. Hamblin Ave. The company will hold a grand opening Oct. 6.

Dehn said Covance will bring at least 43 jobs downtown but, "based on my conversations with the company it could grow much more than that, sooner than we expected."

The Global Food Protection Institute, an umbrella organization in food protection, has created an educational institution for food inspectors that the Food and Drug Administration now considers its number one training partner in the country, Dehn said. It is continuing to develop an emerging technology accelerator and a career development

network for food professionals.

The plan also supports Kellogg Co., which has committed to moving about 600 people to two existing buildings downtown from its industrial offices on Porter Street. Dehn said the move should be complete by December.

The Hinman Co. owns those two buildings, at 67 and 70 W. Michigan Ave., and is investing about \$4 million into each of the landmark structures. A section of Jackson Street between Kellogg's corporate headquarters and one of the buildings is being transformed into a pedestrian walkway to support a walkable environment downtown.

Progress has been slower than expected in redesigning the city's downtown streets and bringing the Battle Creek Area Math and Science Center to the former Cereal City USA at 171 W. Michigan Ave.

Construction along Michigan Avenue and McCamly Street was expected to begin this fall, but was pushed back to the spring when it appeared phase one might not have been completed by the time winter set in, Dehn said.

Funding for the \$18.8 million renovation of the former Cereal City USA has been hard to find, but the project must move forward one way or the other, he said. The Math and Science Center is at capacity in its current building and its presence downtown is an integral part of encouraging young people to develop their careers in Battle Creek.

"We have to make decisions," he said. "It's not a yes or no -- we have to do something."

Dehn said his organization again has begun purchasing property downtown that has become blighted. Battle Creek Unlimited in June purchased 64 W. Michigan Ave., a vacant building at the northeast corner of Michigan and McCamly, for \$350,000.

The downtown plan originally proposed building a new events plaza on the site. Although that plan has been scrapped, the blighted building could still face the wrecking ball if no other viable use can be found for it.

"When a building has been vacant for a long time ... it's not something we can ignore," Dehn said.

A buzz about the downtown project has attracted interest from a few restaurateurs who have not yet committed to Battle Creek, but Dehn said at least one is very close.

The buzz also brought some 75 people to hear Dehn's presentation Wednesday and offer their insight for improving the plan.

Several people expressed concern that the various elements of the plan drown out what they say should be the core message of the transformation -- to create jobs downtown. Some people said they want to see Battle Creek businesses given priority when bidding contracts. Others want the city to make downtown business development a top priority.

"We want to continue the emphasis on bringing the jobs downtown," Dennis Bona, Kellogg Community College president, said.

A few people expressed concern that they have not seen a long-term plan for sustaining the momentum created by the revitalization, and that the lack of a downtown director could lead to stagnation.

"Once you have all of this complete, how do you maintain it?" asked Diane Thompson, executive director of the Miller Foundation.

Talia Champlin turned the question back on the participants, asking what they could do personally to support the downtown revitalization.

"Part of how we get it finished is we as a community

get it done," she said.

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