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Progress: Battle Creek has plans for a major facelift

Consultant has a vision for city's look

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If first impressions are the most important, then it's a good thing Norma Lynn Cutler is getting paid to stick around.

"It was sad, actually," the California-based consultant said of her first impression of downtown.

The gateway reminded her of a steel belt and the streets appeared dormant, Cutler said.

But not for long.

Cutler is the owner (or lead drum majorette, according to her business card) of Cutler Enterprises in Marina Del Rey. She also could be thought of as the cosmetic surgeon enlisted to perform a major facelift on downtown as part of Battle Creek Unlimited's downtown revitalization plans.

Whereas BCU is hoping to attract top talent and food science students and professionals to the city, Cutler's mission is to make them want to stay.

"We want more than for them just to come here to do studies; we want them to fall in love with (the city)," she said.

Cutler is the artist behind the colorful and whimsical concept drawings released when BCU announced the project plans in November, but she's enlisting the help of Battle Creek students, artists and workers to transform downtown into the vibrant, energetic scene she envisions.

"For us as Californians to come in and superimpose our aesthetic on Michigan, seemed to be inappropriate and not very productive in the long haul," she said.

For starters, Cutler is working with the Arts & Industry Council – the cultural branch of BCU – to host a student art contest across the county. The top entries will not only receive scholarship money for themselves and their schools, but also will have their drawings transformed into metal artwork to adorn an arch to be placed over the M-66 downtown entryway.

She said that involving children in the project "tends to be something that not only individuals are proud of, but the community is proud of."

Cutler said she also plans to use all Battle Creek metal workers and artists to construct the arch so as to keep dollars local.

"There was mention of some other people that are nearby, but to me, nearby is not the same thing," she said. "If this is the entrance to Battle Creek, I want people who are going to take pride from the minute it starts 'til the end of it, and that also will watch over and take care of it."

Her vision for downtown is to get the streets more animated, and to stay that way longer than just the warmer months. This would involve designing warming benches that would allow people to sit outside and enjoy winter events such as the International Festival of Lights.

From illuminated arches over Michigan Avenue to trash cans and bike racks, Cutler said she envisions a cohesive look with bright lights that create a festive atmosphere. One image repeated throughout her concepts is that of artistically represented cornhusks -- which pay tribute to the city's history with cereal manufacturing while attributing to a look that can be uniquely Battle Creek.

"It's so you can't mistake where you are," she said. "You know you're not in Florida, you know you're not in Beverly Hills, you know you're in Battle Creek. And you add the festival lighting so that it gives kind of a party atmosphere, because downtown should be perceived as a place of gathering, of socialization or of camaraderie."

BCU is investing more than \$2 million in revitalizing downtown's vibe -- a necessary ingredient for attracting the type of business and talent the city hopes to host, BCU President and Chief Executive Officer Karl Dehn said.

"We knew we had to do something drastically different," he said. "Downtown needs a look of vibrancy and excitement and activity. We needed to look at materials that are different than any we've ever used in Battle Creek and might be unique to any other communities, even those that have been updated in the last five to 10 years."

Through the use of more lighting that also is energy efficient, Dehn said he hopes the revitalization also will create a clean and safe perception of downtown. Cutler said she plans to also make use of items such as LED screens that will make Michigan Avenue appear more vibrant.

"Not overwhelming screens that make it look like Times Square, but just another thing that seems to add movement and energy even when nobody's on the street," she said.

Although the construction of Kellogg Co.'s new six-story building in downtown has been put on hold for a year because of the economy, Dehn and Cutler said work on all other areas of the revitalization project have continued full-steam.

The gateway arch project involving children's artwork could go up as soon as the end of June, Cutler said. The project actually has been accelerated because the state has shown interest in replicating the project in other communities, but she said other major, visible changes probably won't begin cropping up until summer 2010.

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