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## Public sees downtown makeover proposal

*Barrett Newkirk*  
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Some Battle Creek residents on Tuesday had their first chance to hear about the full scope of downtown's proposed makeover.

The plan, put forth by Battle Creek Unlimited, includes expanding business, science and educational facilities, but it's been criticized because it would clear away some older buildings for a new park.

All of those pieces were part of a presentation by BCU leaders during a public workshop Tuesday with city commissioners and about 20 city residents.

While groups around the city had already seen the presentation, this was the first time it was part of a public city meeting.

A 10-minute video illustrated the project with before-and-after images of possible changes, including artwork along the M-66 entrance to downtown, improved street lighting and landscaping, and the park at the northeast corner of Michigan Avenue and McCamly Street.

Also included in the plan are projects to increase Battle Creek's appeal to employers like a new headquarters for Kellogg Co., an expansion of the Battle Creek Area Math and Science Center and a new food safety research facility.

But the proposed park and lack of earlier public input, not the economic projects, brought most of the concerns from city residents and commissioners.

People said they would rather see the city working to keep older buildings intact.

"I'm all for green spaces, but at the cost of what few original buildings we have left?" asked resident Laurie Sullivan.

The park would mean the demolition of four buildings along Michigan Avenue, all but one of which are mostly vacant.

David Nielson agreed that it was important to create a vibrant downtown that attracts young, creative professionals, but he said that when "young professional" described him, he wasn't too interested in park space.

"I wanted shopping, I wanted restaurants, I wanted clubs, I wanted theater," Nielson said. "I'm not sure where a park came in my list of priorities, but it wasn't anywhere near the top."

Commissioner Chris Simmons said he agreed with a statement by BCU's Jim Hettinger that preservation is not always viable.

"Many of these buildings are, in my view, not particularly historic and not well utilized," Simmons said,

adding that he would be open to seeing more information about the buildings' potential historical value.

Other people said it concerned them that the plan was only now getting extensive public input.

Jeremy Andrews said that to him, the plan was still "pretty weak" even after years of work from BCU.

City Manager Ken Tsuchiyama said some parts of the plan had been kept away from the public because the information could have jeopardized certain components.

Support for the plan came from leaders of the Battle Creek Downtown Development Partnership, including board member Kathy Grosso, also principal at St. Philip Catholic Central High School.

"We've been waiting for this," she said. "It's really good to have a vision. It's not perfect, but it's a vision."

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