



November 19, 2009

Public urges street smarts at downtown presentation

Nearly 200 attend downtown presentation

Elizabeth Willis
The Enquirer

The public wants Battle Creek to learn from its past mistakes as it moves forward with a plan to transform downtown.

Nearly 200 citizens attended a presentation Wednesday in the McCamly Plaza Hotel in order to learn more about the Cereal City's downtown revitalization and provide input to guide future developments.

Peter Kobs of True Wind Media, a company located on Michigan Avenue, asked Battle Creek Unlimited, the economic development firm leading the initiative, to learn from the recent closures of a comedy club, bakery and restaurant, as well as from a condominium project that never got off the ground.

"We need to learn from those failures," he said.

Harry Conway Jr., who said he has worked in downtown Battle Creek for 36 years, said Michigan Avenue will never return to its retail glory, in the same way Detroit will never again dominate the auto manufacturing industry. He said the city should not try to duplicate its past but reinvent itself for the future.

"We are going to be more strategic in where we place our investments," responded Karl Dehn, BCU's president and chief executive officer.

He and others talked about the progress Battle Creek has made since the transformation plan was unveiled a little less than a year ago:

- A food protection training institute has already begun to develop a standardized training regime that would protect the food supply chain.
- Kellogg Co. has committed to moving hundreds of its employees downtown to help spur economic growth for the company and the city.
- Plans to expand the Battle Creek Area Math and Science Center downtown and create an events plaza have been explored.
- Metal plates bearing student's artwork have been made to hang along the downtown's main entrance.

"We're excited for the youth in our community to participate and have ownership and tell the story of Battle Creek as people enter our town," Dehn said.

John Godfrey, a former downtown business owner, implored the city to encourage Kellogg employees

to eat and shop along Michigan Avenue, not just in the spaces between and inside their current buildings.

Sherii Sherban, a business owner, asked if the plan to improve infrastructure only included Michigan Avenue.

Dehn said no; that this was just the start of a three-year plan to transform the heart of the Cereal City.

"We don't intend to stop at Michigan Avenue," he said.

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