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Downtown vision takes form

Meeting this week will review standards for new building

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Community Perspective

What do you get when you cross a proven approach to urban revitalization with a group of Fairbanksans? Urban revitalization that will succeed in our unusual climate.

Since the Fairbanks North Star Borough Assembly unanimously adopted Vision Fairbanks as part of the Regional Comprehensive Plan on Aug. 21, 2008, community members, borough and city staff and consultant Crandall Arambula have been hard at work drafting "standards and guidelines," one of the plan's implementation strategies. These standards and guidelines strengthen an administrative framework that will ensure creation of the mixed uses and pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly improvements needed to make a functional, prosperous downtown centered on retail, services and entertainment.

These standards and guidelines are in draft form. They will be finalized on the basis of a public workshop Wednesday night, after every willing and available Fairbanksan has had an opportunity to contribute.

Vision Fairbanks aims to cre-

ate an urban environment where people want to be. Because cities made of streets and buildings should contain lots of people doing lots of things, the standards and guidelines will make the streets and buildings attractive to people. With a climate as special as ours, the feel and function of our city are nearly as important as the merchants' goods and services housed within the buildings lining the streets.

"Street standards" are specific requirements that address traffic lane widths, on-street parking, sidewalk widths, streetscape landscaping, additional right of way needs and more. The street standards will be administered as requirements for future downtown right of way improvements by the city Public Works Department.

"Development standards" are specific minimum requirements that pertain only to parcels in the downtown retail and commercial core. Used to create vibrant retail and commercial centers, the development standards address ground-floor uses, "active edges" of buildings, build-to lines, means of protecting pedestrians from the elements, minimum parking requirements and prohibited ground-floor

building materials. Every present use and building downtown is grandfathered. Parts of the development standards will need adoption into city building code; others will be inserted into a borough ordinance. But the primary role for development standards at this time is a source document for developing new zoning types in the downtown core to spawn mixed uses.

Finally, the "design guidelines" seek design excellence in the built environment. They address a range of subjective criteria; as such, they are discretionary, to be administered by a Design Commission created by ordinance and administered by the borough Planning Commission.

The administrative framework embodied in street standards, development standards, and design guidelines is unlikely by itself to attract private investment and economic development. That's where other Vision Fairbanks implementation steps come in. Two of these are under way and bear mentioning.

• Cushman Street two-way in 2011. The best downtowns have a concentration of local-serving retail available to shoppers on a pedestrian-friendly signature "Main Street." Signature street infrastructure is carefully calculated to stimulate new development and private investment downtown. Cushman as a two-way street would reduce traffic speeds and create a safe pedestrian environment; widened sidewalks would be be shopper-friendly;

less out-of-direction travel would reduce driver frustration in getting to a shopping or service destination; on-street parking would serve shops in the downtown core; and parking access generally would be improved.

In keeping with the Vision plan and the benefits of creating a signature street, the Fairbanks Metropolitan Area Transportation System (FMATS) made a strategic investment in revitalizing downtown Fairbanks by committing \$6 million to make Cushman two-way in 2011. These are state funds that cannot be reallocated without FMATS Policy Committee concurrence and legislative approval.

• Recruiting retail. To earn a return on investment from the Cushman Street improvements, the Downtown Association will hire a retail recruiter in the first half of this year. The immediate task is to boost occupancy rates downtown; later, to attract an anchor retailer downtown that, in building its storefront, will rely on the standards and guidelines.

So please join the Downtown Association of Fairbanks for a presentation and work session to implement Vision Fairbanks on Wednesday, 5:30 – 7:30 p.m., at the Carlson Center. With Fairbanksans staying engaged in Vision Fairbanks implementation, urban revitalization will work.

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