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City shouldn't undermine plans for two-way Cushman

The city of Fairbanks should maintain its commitment to revitalizing the downtown area in the manner developed through the Vision Fairbanks process and adopted by the borough in its comprehensive plan last year.

The city council on Monday will consider a resolution that would withdraw the city's support for an essential step in that process: the restoration of two-way traffic to Cushman Street.

The resolution would knock the legs out from under the Vision Fairbanks plan before it has had a chance to stand up and walk.

The direction of that walk will become clearer at a meeting Wednesday evening in the Carlson Center. There, people will be given some of the detailed information on what sort of rules, regulations and guidelines will be necessary to implement the revitalization plan.

The council, in the least, should wait to consider the Cushman Street resolution until council members and the community have a chance to see how the two-way proposal fits with the ideas presented Wednesday.

The Vision Fairbanks plan has obtained a huge amount of public input to date. That input supported a "vision" that would transform downtown Fairbanks into a magnet for the entire region. Making Cushman into a two-way street is a key step in that transformation.

The transformation has already begun, albeit for other reasons. The city converted the section of Cushman between Gaffney Road and 10th Street to two-way traffic last year to better accommodate emergency vehicles leaving the Fairbanks police and fire departments.

The proposed city resolution, sponsored by Councilman Jerry Cleworth, asserts that extending Cushman's two-way traffic north into the old downtown core would create traffic congestion and discourage shoppers and tourists.

Indeed, it would slow traffic, but that won't necessarily discourage shoppers and tourists. In fact, slowing down the traffic is part of the "vision" that is expected to actually draw people into downtown. Many communities around the nation are adopting this approach, successfully re-establishing their old downtown areas as destinations rather than places to bypass with high-speed thoroughfares.

Cushman Street today isn't a high-speed thoroughfare, but neither is it a route that invites one to linger. For many people, its primary function is to provide access to one of the bridges across the Chena River.

With the establishment of a second bridge between Barnette and Illinois streets a few years hence, the need for Cushman to serve as a thoroughfare will be reduced. As part of that change, the city's "main street" should become a slower, visitor-friendly route.