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Two-way Cushman remains on track

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The Vision Fairbanks downtown revitalization plan will move forward unhindered by city politics after Fairbanks Mayor Terry Strle broke a tie vote regarding a resolution proposed by Councilman Jerry Cleworth to abandon the conversion of Cushman Street into two-way traffic.

The conversion of Cushman Street is a key component of the overall Vision Fairbanks plan.

Borough and city residents packed the council chambers with not even standing room available and the crowd poured into the hallways of city hall on Monday night.

After three hours of public comment, members of the City Council continued to debate technicalities with the project but ultimately voted down the

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resolution that would have kept Cushman Street one-way. The move is an affirmation of the Vision Fairbanks downtown revitalization plan.

Fairbanks North Star Borough Assembly members, borough planning commission members and downtown business and property owners contributed strong support for the Vision Fairbanks plan that has promised to bring economic vitality to the downtown core area by creating a more pedestrian and shopper friendly atmosphere.

Before voting, the author of the resolution against the street switch, Councilman Jerry Cleworth, said, "I hope whether this passes or fails, that the downtown association takes a good look at the project construction between First and Fifth streets."

Councilmembers Jerry Cleworth, Vivian Stiver and Chad Roberts voted in support of the resolution to halt the conversion. Councilmembers Bernard Gatewood, John Eberhart and Emily Bratcher each voted against the resolution and to keep the conversion moving.

Questions remain about details of the traffic conversion project, as do concerns about funding the project.

"I think the people have again spoken. We have experienced one of the greatest public participating events in the history of Fairbanks politics. This plan has been in the works for over three years,

been approved by both the city and borough governments, various citizen review committees as well as experts in their respective fields," Bratcher said.

The resolution raised concerns about funding for the road project, parallel parking, emergency vehicle response and snow removal issues.

Councilman Chad Roberts, in speaking against the Cushman Street switch, said he doesn't believe the Vision Fairbanks plan will bring economic growth to downtown. "There are barely 100,000 people in our borough, and we are very divided on how we spend our money. The major retail has come to the north of town, and I don't believe we are going to see a big growth of retail (downtown)."

Fairbanks North Star Borough assembly member Luke Hopkins, speaking in public comments, asked the council to let the project go forward until a time when project obstacles with sidewalks and emergency vehicle access are worked out by Vision Fairbanks planners.

Fairbanks North Star Borough community planning director Bernardo Hernandez said, "A major part of this planning talks about bringing vitality to downtown. This is a joint public/private partnership. We've just adopted the plan, and now we're going through implementation."

Chris Miller, a former member of the planning commission, has recently moved into the downtown area and made personal investments there because of the Vision plan, he told the council. "I saw

power and energy behind the hundreds of people who took part in the original development plan. This council is not the forum to debate specifics. That work happens with engineers. We need a downtown. Every community has a living room, a place where people come together. I don't think we want the Yukon Quest to finish in the Wal-Mart parking lot."

John Jackovich, owner of the Big I bar, made it clear he was in support of economic vitality in downtown Fairbanks, but stated he was strongly opposed to making Cushman Street two-way.

Councilwoman Vivian Stiver agreed, saying, "To me, there are still details that need to be worked out. We don't know when any new investment may come downtown. It may be years, given the state of the economy."

More public comments were in support of the Vision plan and the conversion of Cushman Street than opposed to it. The Fairbanks City Council originally approved the Vision plan in April 2008.

On Wednesday, Vision Fairbanks planners will host a public workshop at the Carlson Center starting at 5:30 p.m. The public is invited to attend and give input into the project.

"It's not clear-cut, and that's always hard, but we have a vision and a plan of where we want to end up. This is not just about making it a two-way street. This is about making good use of public dollars and about bringing pride to this community," Hernandez said.