

THE LAWTON CONSTITUTION

Developing Downtown Major improvements envisioned

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September 8, 2006

If necessity is the mother of invention, opportunity may be the father.

Supporters of a new plan to revive downtown Lawton are hoping both parents are willing to nurture the latest effort to make the area a thriving business and residential district.

The Lawton Urban Renewal Authority has already obtained a grant to spruce up Northwest 2nd Street leading into downtown from Interstate 44, a project that has been used as a springboard to reconsider the entirety of Lawton's central business district. On Wednesday, city, county and civic leaders gathered at the Carnegie Library Town Hall to see what the future might hold for downtown.

It's not your father's downtown. But it might be your grandfather's.

The goal, developed into a plan by Stainback Public/Private Real Estate, is to mix shopping, entertainment and residential development into a compact area — by design, not chance — to create any area where people “live, work and play.”

The first big step was taken Wednesday: Stainback mailed

proposals to about 150 regional and national developers to see what they might do with a 12-block area, from Northwest Second Street to Railroad Street and from Gore Boulevard to Ferris Avenue. The goal is to find a developer who would take the entire chunk and create retail and entertainment space.

Mike Brown, former chairman of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and chairman of the task force for the first phase of the project, said the area was chosen by popular demand. Developers were asking about the area — previously, C Avenue was thought to be the center of interest — so supporters decided that if opportunity was knocking there was no reason not to answer. With a smile.

And a come-hither look. Two other areas — around the library and on C Avenue across from Central Mall — are on the fast track for future requests for proposals.

“We think there's such a strong demand ... the redevelopment community would have no problem doing all three at one time,” said John Stainback, who heads the firm hired to develop the plan.

Stainback isn't relying on sentiment; the numbers, he said, back up the claim that opportunity is at the

door. A market analysis found demand for thousands of new housing units, as well as plenty of retail and entertainment space.

“What's exciting about this project is the market demand is so strong,” he said.

“It'd be different if I was dreaming this stuff up,” Stainback said. “I'd be worried. I couldn't be so excited.”

Total value of construction over the next decade, Stainback said, is a half-billion dollars, which will create sales tax, property tax and jobs.

If opportunity is at the door, necessity is just around the corner. Brown thinks Lawton needs a strong downtown to reach its promise as the hub of Southwest Oklahoma. “I think our community's ready,” he said. “It has to be a community effort. Lawton is the hub of Southwest Oklahoma and we have to start acting like it.

Historically, Lawton has fared well in good and bad times, Brown said, so it's not just a matter of survival; but if Lawton wants to thrive instead of survive, it needs a strong downtown that will be a magnet.

“We can survive economically,” he said. “We need to prosper

economically. We need to provide the opportunity for prosperity for ourselves and our kids and our grandkids.”

Dreams of Bricktown success

Bricktown in Oklahoma City, of course, is the example that no one wants to mention but does anyway. Lawton isn't Oklahoma City, and it has different resources. But the comparison begs to be made, supporters of downtown believe. After all, how many in Oklahoma City would have thought Bricktown would turn out to be as successful as it has been?

The master plan for Lawton dreams no small dreams. There is room for an arena for a professional sports

team, a convention center, nooks and crannies that can be used for Lawton to tell its story through parks and statues and fountains.

Will it all come to pass? Probably not.

“This is a vision plan; we have to start somewhere,” Brown said. “This is a conceptual plan. It is the beginning. It is a dynamic thing. We will be using this, adjusting this, getting public support on all facets of the plan.”

50-acre first phase

The first phase comprises about 50 acres, about two-thirds of it in private hands. The Urban Renewal Authority will select a firm to

acquire property for the project. Prices, Stainback said, will be at fair market value. City Manager Larry Mitchell acknowledges the city could invoke the power of eminent domain to acquire property, but that would be a last resort.

“Those of us who are involved with this have a conviction to make sure they are treated fairly,” Brown said.

RANDY STOTLER/STAFF

Mike Brown, chairman of the task force that will spearhead the first phase of downtown redevelopment, explains the master vision plan, which outlines goals for downtown ranging from retail to housing to hotel development.