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Wichita City Council votes to hire downtown developer

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The Wichita Eagle

Downtown development philosophies clashed in the Wichita City Council chambers on Tuesday.

Some argued that special tax incentives for downtown are unfair to those who develop elsewhere in the city. Others said the city's core is pivotal for the health and growth of the whole city.

When the discussion ended, those in favor of paying the Boston-based Goody Clancy firm \$500,000 to create a 20-year downtown revitalization plan walked away with an easy victory — a 7-0 vote.

The move will lead to a series of public meetings where consultants will gather opinions about the future of downtown.

Goody Clancy's consortium of consultants will then analyze what types of new development downtown can support, do extensive research on the city's previous downtown plans and create a draft plan.

Finally, after more public meetings, the city will vote on a 20-year plan and start implementing projects that could drastically alter downtown and call for more taxpayer-backed subsidies to draw select types of development.

The city will pay for 45 percent of the contract; the Wichita Downtown Development Corp. will pick up the rest — \$100,000 of which it is raising through private donations.

Though the price is modest in the context of city spending, some feel it puts the city on a path toward more taxpayer-subsidized development that could fail.

Bob Weeks, a blogger who frequently criticizes city spending, was one of six people who spoke in opposition to the contract.

He said the city has already invested about \$41 million in the struggling WaterWalk project and has little to show for it.

"Shouldn't we see if we can nurture this project to success before we take on projects that are much larger?" he asked.

But downtown developers, young professionals and council members defended the contract.

Council member Paul Gray, who also has been critical of some downtown tax increment finance districts, said the city has had failures downtown because it lacks focus and a comprehensive plan.

"I'm critical because I want it to be successful," he said, explaining why he supports the contract. "I don't want it to be a white elephant."

Jeff Fluhr, president of the Wichita Downtown Development Corp., said hundreds of people and dozens of companies have already gotten involved in the process.

"It's a mark of the energy, the excitement behind this and the opportunity we have," he said.

Jason Dilts, a member of the downtown plan steering committee who also occasionally writes about entertainment for The Eagle, advocated for the council to approve the contract.

He said there are many people and businesses who want to move downtown. They're just waiting to see a well-thought-out plan.

"Every day that we don't move forward on downtown development is a day we're not moving forward with the future of our city," he said.

Benny Boman said he's been paying taxes in Wichita for 52 years. He recalls when downtown was vibrant decades ago. "What happened?" he asked.

He said places like Towne East Square and Towne West Square shopping centers provided easy parking and access to shopping and entertainment while downtown did not.

"People moved on," he said, urging the city to forgo the contract.

Council member Janet Miller countered arguments that the city should let the free market control the future of downtown.

"We have seen what happens as downtown starts to decay and goes into a free fall and becomes much more expensive to develop," she said.

Mayor Carl Brewer, who has made downtown development a top issue, said the council's full support shows the importance of the city's core.

"It used to be, years ago, that downtown was District 1 or District 6," he said. "I think the message you're seeing up here today is that downtown is everybody's neighborhood."

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