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Design firm confident in downtown possibilities

BY BILL WILSON
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David Dixon laughs at the question: Can Wichita's downtown be successfully redeveloped? "Certainly," said Dixon, the principal in charge of urban planning and design at Goody, Clancy & Associates in Boston. Dixon's firm has a \$500,000 contract to pull together a vision of what Wichitans want from their downtown.

He said his firm will turn that dream into a comprehensive redevelopment plan for the next two decades.

"The elements are in place ... and one of the things Wichita's doing right is creating a plan right now," Dixon said.

"The economy is getting better, but the slowdown in development is profound, credit is hard to come by for real estate development, and the housing markets are in tough shape.

"So it's a terrific time to plan ahead for when the economy corrects itself in a couple of years... to reimagine downtown as the heart of a region in the midst of a housing mixed-use boom."

Goody Clancy will assemble a multi-disciplinary group of experts — ranging from housing to downtown retail market analysts — to plot downtown Wichita's future. The firm will spend the next nine to 12 months crafting a 20-year comprehensive plan that community leaders can take to the public for support.

Here are a few highlights of what it intends to do:

- * An in-depth analysis of the Wichita market, including transportation, development financing, retail, housing and infrastructure.
- * A far-reaching plan to gather input from Wichitans, including electronic polling, Internet-based input and an interactive system to collect cell phone photos from the public, headed by Mary Means, creator of the National Main Street revitalization program for small towns.
- * Demographic studies to ascertain who uses downtown and why.
- * Public meetings with community organizations and individuals, designed to gather feedback and help residents "understand their community better," Dixon said.
- * A business plan to "strategize for the success" of retailers, multi-family housing developers and other firms targeted as downtown Wichita redevelops.

Goody Clancy officials involved in the Wichita project were active participants in this week's Visioneering trip to Chattanooga, Tenn.

They interviewed some of the 63 business, political and community leaders from Wichita participating in the trip, took photos and assessed Chattanooga's success in rebuilding its downtown. It's a fact-finding approach similar to what will be used in Wichita when the company arrives here to begin work.

In addition, the company held brainstorming sessions each day that yielded one proposal by trip's end — to network some of the young professionals active in Wichita's downtown through ROK ICT with counterparts in Chattanooga.

Wichita's assets

Dixon and his team have been to Wichita for a preliminary assessment.

Their conclusion: There's no reason why downtown can't successfully redevelop, despite the construction of attractions without the benefit of planning.

"Wichita has made some very important decisions, whether by commission or omission," said Dixon, who spent Thursday in Chattanooga interacting with the Visioneering group.

"These attractions are all downtown, and downtown is large, but not so large that they cannot be connected."

The biggest connectivity challenge lies between Intrust Bank Arena and Century II, Dixon said, but it's a "completely resolvable" challenge.

"In some ways, your arena has been located brilliantly in an area with a lot of development potential, one that lends itself to the kinds of funky uses that can thrive around an arena," Dixon said.

"But your convention center isn't so far from the arena that they cannot work together to support the kinds of restaurants and visitor-oriented retail that make a downtown more livable."

The other piece of the downtown puzzle is residential. Again, Dixon sees two big advantages in Wichita: The Minnesota Guys' work in 13 downtown buildings to create condos and apartments, and the timing of the planning process.

"I was surprised, frankly, to discover that somebody had bought 13 downtown buildings and wanted to convert them to housing," Dixon said, "surprised at someone's willingness to see that far ahead and do the hard work to get there."

Wichita's planning comes at a time when the urban housing market is growing across the country, Dixon said.

"The housing demand over the next 15 years or more, a very substantial portion of that is for 1- and 2-person households that are much more likely to live downtown," he said.

"You already have an arena, a convention center that's helping to support new business downtown, so you have a very potent housing market you can attract to your downtown."

Wichita's challenges

Dixon's aware of the opposition in Wichita to public funds being used in downtown redevelopment, evidenced by the debate that preceded Tuesday's vote by the Wichita City Council to approve the \$500,000 contract with his firm.

Dixon's confident that once Goody Clancy completes its work, the naysayers will come around.

"One of the things that's struck me in my redevelopment work is that we've worked in cities that are very liberal and very conservative," Dixon said.

"In many cases, they end up doing the same things because ultimately they're pragmatic. Spending tax dollars on projects that we can demonstrate yielding substantial returns is prudent public policy."

Wichitans need to see revitalization as a long-term project, Dixon said.

"For a long time, urban real estate values were dropping compared to suburban values," he said. "You could say public money invested in cities wasn't a good investment. That period is absolutely over."

"If you look around the country, cities and downtowns are rising in value faster than regions. They've become great places to invest public money because you're going to get a return."

Reviews

Goody Clancy's Wichita plan is familiar to Kurt Weigle, president of the Downtown Development District of New Orleans, and Asheville, N.C., vice mayor Jan Davis.

Their message to Wichitans: Expect Goody Clancy to provide you an achievable road map to improve your downtown's future.

Goody Clancy has led the redevelopment plan for Weigle's district, which includes the French Quarter, and is doing the master planning for the city as it rebuilds from Hurricane Katrina.

"The most important thing about Goody Clancy is that, being a design firm and urban planners, they're very strong in the design phase," Weigle said.

"But they also bring a very good understanding of real estate development and they do a very strong market analysis to gauge what you need. They're very strong in the financial and economic side of development, very multi-disciplinary."

Weigle called Goody Clancy "practical" in its approach to planning.

"They're proponents of good transit, good walkability, human-scale types of development," he said.

And Weigle praised the group's ability to enlist public input.

"They were really able to rally folks to participate and contribute to the process," he said. "And they understand clearly that part of their job is to educate people on good design and development processes to help your community make good decisions."

Davis said Goody Clancy used public input to streamline his community's development process while producing a comprehensive plan for a 50-square-block downtown. But he said the plan's price tag — \$200,000 — was too much.

"In my opinion, it may have helped us get to this place quicker than we may have gotten to it anyhow...," Davis said.

"I'm pretty skeptical of consultants to begin with, and in a perfect world I think you expect a consultant to do what you pay them to say. The price, you might say, determines how big a form letter you get.

"But with Goody Clancy, that wasn't the case.... They did a real good job. It was time well spent and something that needed to be done here."

What Wichita wants

City and downtown leaders want a lot from Goody Clancy: An assessment of downtown today, an accurate picture of the vision Wichitans have for downtown and a business plan to make it happen, complete with the Boston firm's ability to link Wichita with developers interested in coming here.

"What they do is look at the finished product, what we want to achieve," said Jeff Fluhr, president of the Wichita Downtown Development Corp. "Then, they tell us about the economics around the project and the opportunities we have right now."

A significant part of Goody Clancy's work will involve networking Wichita with interested nationwide developers.

"They have the conversations with the developer in the very beginning," Fluhr said. "What we've heard is they'll look toward the local community and identify opportunities.

"Then, they bring to the table their relationships with developers from around the country. Those can be partnerships with our local developers, helping with risk to get into the market, strengthening the market."

It's Goody Clancy's full package of expertise that attracted Wichita Mayor Carl Brewer.

"When I'm talking about downtown, or when some of our other folks are talking about downtown, it's a dream, a vision for what we'd like our city to be," the mayor said.

"But Goody Clancy, those folks have done it. They've been to the mountain top, they've seen it and they know how they got there."

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