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Consultant: Patience key to downtown plan

BY BILL WILSON
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Some themes are emerging as the city's downtown revitalization consultant continues its listening tour.

Boston-based Goody Clancy has about 300 downtown Wichita stakeholders on its visit list as it gathers input on downtown's future.

Some of those stakeholders are firmly behind planning downtown's next two decades.

However, they fear that progress may not be quick enough for Wichitans once the Goody Clancy plan is put into action, hindered by frozen credit markets that aren't likely to thaw soon.

"It's a dual challenge," said Wichita developer and investor Herb Krumsick. "The overall condition of the marketplace, quite candidly, is poor. You can go to a national convention as I do and people will tell you that the development business is done for several years.

"And then name an investor or a family who isn't hunkered down right now? Tough time."

Steve Martens, a commercial real estate broker and former president of the Greater Wichita Economic Development Coalition, said patience will be essential.

"Any kind of redevelopment project will obviously take capital that for the foreseeable future will be hard to come by," he said. "Those conditions will change and it's not going to be a forever deal.

"The thing is, we're going to need to be patient on the implementation of this plan."

There's enthusiasm for downtown redevelopment, from Michael Elzufon's emphatic "foot on the throttle" approach to veteran Wichita investor Steve Clark's admission that any downtown redevelopment success requires city involvement.

"It's time to step to the plate and march forward," Elzufon said in a near-shout, "leveraging the great work done downtown by the Dave Burks, the arena, beyond things we've done.

"... If we have the wherewithal to deal with these storms but we maintain our commitment and dedication to what we're after downtown, we'll only be further ahead when things turn around."

One quick way to maintain that commitment with credit tight, Martens said, is to focus on making downtown walkable.

"We've got a great example in Wichita in the incredible transformation in the last four years in the Wichita State campus," Martens said.

"They've done a fantastic job of transforming what once had been parking lots and streets with lots of buildings into a beautifully landscaped appealing and inviting area to walk. That's what we need to capture downtown."

Clark, a privately funded developer, admits that taxpayer money will be essential to revitalizing downtown.

The city, though, shouldn't enter into any redevelopment partnerships "without significant private skin in the game," he said.

"I'm bothered by the way the city has approached these partnerships in the past," he said, "which have been very non-market-based arrangements.

"A lot of the developers who come downtown don't have any skin in the game. If someone wants to do a deal and the city wants to stand beside them, fine, but ensure they have skin in the game rather than using the city's money and resources to create their own upside."

Equally important is communication, several said: Make sure Wichitans understand the economic climate in which revitalization begins.

"Real estate cycles run five to seven years," Clark said, "and we're in the second inning of a down cycle. Don't expect things to happen quickly anywhere, and especially with the Wichita economy lagging the national economy due to the plant layoffs."

A timeline and realistic expectations should be incorporated into the final downtown plan, Martens said.

"Those who succeed (at redevelopment) can match people's expectations with the finished product," he said. "It's going to be important to be very honest with the public."

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