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## Visioneers' next focus? Animating downtown

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CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. —The work begins now for Visioneering Wichita's 63-member team after it completed a three-day look Friday at how the nation's "dirtiest city" turned itself around over 40 years.

That work may begin with "animating" downtown, bringing more people to the city's center in an effort to begin building a community deemed essential to the long-term vision for revitalization.

The fact-finding trip to Chattanooga, organized by Visioneering and the Wichita Metro Chamber of Commerce, is the fourth such visit to other cities designed to gather information on how best to revitalize downtown Wichita.

During two brainstorming sessions Friday morning — following two days touring Chattanooga's redeveloped downtown — the biggest task on the group's checklist was gathering and entertaining people in downtown Wichita.

But the group also sounded a warning for opponents of the downtown redevelopment plan, talking extensively about a game plan to deal with the community's "naysayers," Wichitans politically opposed to public-private development partnerships.

The group's redevelopment focus centered on Miller Plaza, a model block of downtown Chattanooga that includes an open-air pavilion, green space, commercial and retail.

"The creation of a place with big public access spaces that are comfortable is critical," said Jon Rolph, the Wichita restaurateur who chairs Visioneering Wichita. "It's the living room for the city, so to speak"

Rolph said family friends in Chattanooga send their kids downtown to "hang out."

"I don't think any of us can imagine high school kids in Wichita saying that, calling downtown a place to hang out," he said.

Turning the farmer's market space near Wichita's Museum of World Treasures or the fountains in front of the Old Town Warren into some of that green space were two ideas.

But without a community of downtown residents and workers, "animating" downtown is a difficult goal, said Gary Schmitt, who handles commercial and residential lending at Intrust Bank.

"The thing I've seen in downtown Wichita is that there's nothing outside of the four walls of my building," Schmitt said. "Maybe I'm going to Century II or the Hyatt for a meeting or an activity."

Schmitt recalled Thursday's Visioneering lunch at Chattanooga's Miller Plaza.

"The thing I really noticed is we had our whole group there, and we still had four or five groups who came in, sat down and had lunch in the same place," he said. "I thought, 'Wow. I'd love to see that kind of interaction in downtown Wichita.'

"It's really important to provide some kind of a facility that will get people out of their buildings to interact."

Downtown events, such as entertainment and the arts, are essential to that interaction.

Mary Means, Wichita's new downtown consultant from Goody Clancy, said that event programming will eventually be market-driven if it's done right.

"If one gets the public realm right on that, I don't see it as trees and benches as much as a downtown that programs and animates," she said. "Your social capital can start that ball rolling, and the market can pick up the animation part later."

Public opposition to downtown revitalization drew more than a half-hour of conversation during the brainstorming

sessions, with one voice from the front of the room saying bluntly, "We have to watch who we elect."

The message was to press ahead pushing the redevelopment vision despite the opposition.

"We have become so focused on consensus as a decision-making tool," Derby city manager Kathy Sexton said.

"There's nothing wrong with placing value on consensus, but at base, we are a democracy and a majority rules.

"If we are stymied by the minority opinion... then we listen and learn from people who have strong opinions. We say thank you for that opinion, the majority rules and we move on."

Wichita Mayor Carl Brewer sided with Sexton.

"I believe this is the right thing to do, and I believe now is the right time," he said, to applause from the group.

"We cannot be intimidated... I know for a fact that the citizens of Wichita believe we should do what we need to do to accomplish this... We need to take a bold stance. If they're not right and they're not telling the truth, then create an environment where we can get the message out."

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