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Chamber ideas sought on core area

By TOM LOTSHAW/The Daily Inter Lake | Posted: Wednesday, August 29, 2012 7:00 am

Architect Corey Johnson said it succinctly: “It’s exciting to dream about what Kalispell will look like in the future.”

That’s exactly what people are being asked to do as a core area revitalization plan takes shape for the city’s railroad corridor.

Johnson spoke Tuesday at the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce’s monthly luncheon.

Johnson and David Koel with CTA Architects were hired by the city to illustrate the plan’s themes and goals. At the luncheon they presented photos of the largely underutilized 365-acre planning area and colorful renderings of what it could look like 10, 20, 30 or 40 years from now.

The railroad tracks that sparked Kalispell’s birth could be removed from its formerly industrial core.

The two or three businesses that still use the tracks could be moved to the Flathead County Rail Park being developed by Flathead County Economic Development Authority at the former McElroy and Wilken gravel pit off Whitefish Stage Road.

In place of the tracks could be a new pedestrian and bike path.

The railroad bridge over East Idaho Street and the Kalispell Lumber building on West Idaho Street could be turned into city gateways, “something fantastic that welcomes you, makes the city start to sing,” Koel said.

The core area also could have end-points: A conference, community or fitness center to the west, a fine arts center or library to the east.

The rest could be filled with new parks and green space, new north-south street connections for better traffic flows, a new parking garage and multiple-use buildings with retail on the ground floor and housing on the second, third and fourth floors.

Jones and Koel momentarily focused on some “no-man’s land” along the tracks near Meridian Road and Center Street. They pictured it as a city park surrounded by dense townhouses with underground parking for residents and the new pedestrian path running through it.

The same went for vacant land north of Kalispell City Mall, which could be turned into an outdoor plaza surrounded by businesses and housing and restaurants.

The plan’s goal is to guide the transformation of a blighted area into a dense and vibrant urban core, creating land for redevelopment that could help Kalispell focus on in-fill and keep it from sprawling into the valley.

“We’re trying to create life and viability where currently there isn’t any,” Johnson said. “It could be many years in the making, but you start with a vision and build toward that”.

The planning process started 18 months ago with a \$175,000 planning grant from the EPA. Planning Director Tom Jentz said Kalispell is still looking for any public input it can get. Questionnaires and comment forms were on every table at Tuesday’s luncheon. Another open house for the plan is today at City Hall from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and city officials will provide individual core area plan presentations if requested.

The plan remains in its draft stages but is on track to be finalized and adopted by year’s end. “This is a vision. Not where we will go, but where we could go, or where we should go. This is going to be a road map for where we could go in the future,” Jentz said of the guiding document’s aim.

But removing the tracks may be as doable as ever, with grant money for planning and the new Flathead County Rail Park.

The rail park gives Kalispell a natural terminus for the tracks and someplace to relocate rail-dependent businesses. It also means a new job-creating site right next to the core area being targeted for redevelopment, Jentz said.

“This is a reality. We’re talking about things that can and will happen,” he said.

Joe Unterreiner, president of the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce, said the plan is just what Kalispell needs.

“It’s leadership we’re excited about seeing, with the mayor and the City Council working on a vision for the future of Kalispell as a place to invest, live and relocate to,” he said. “It’s a lot of pieces coming together at what seems like the right time to make this opportunity possible and very exciting”.

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