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Ideas hatched for Taylor Heights revival

City given options for west-side area

Sheboygan Press staff

To take the Taylor Drive commercial corridor off life support and get it thriving again, an Appleton consultant is pitching three ways to inject the flailing retail area with new residents and employees, which in turn would support new business.

OMNNI Associates met with the Sheboygan Common Council's Committee of the Whole Monday night. The consultant talked up the possibility of creating either an event park with a hotel or conference center; a research office park with mixed use retail, or a senior residential development with close-by retail to pump up activity along Taylor Drive, which in recent years has lost a Wal-Mart, Piggly Wiggly, Sentry, and Blockbuster Video.

Memorial Mall has also been struggling to keep tenants and draw shoppers.

"You have to change the dynamic of the district for it to revitalize itself," said Jeff Sanders, a principal planner with OMNNI. "If no change occurs, a continuation of what has occurred in the past will be the norm."

The corridor includes Taylor Drive stretching from roughly Kohler Memorial Drive south to Indiana Avenue, and includes the Schuchardt farm, a large tract of undeveloped, private land city officials and consultants see as critical to the area's long-term success.

The land includes pristine woods that are being envisioned as an excellent location for a festival or event grounds.

"It's going to have the major impact on the corridor itself," said Steve Sokolowski, the city's planning and zoning manager.

The research office park, featuring a sustainable theme, could also draw people to work in the area, and stores would be needed to serve them. And having a 55-plus residential area for active seniors would bring in residents who want to live near stores, shops and restaurants, officials said.

OMNNI will be talking with city planners over the next few weeks in developing the preferred alternative for Taylor Drive, though a date for coming back to the full council for approval of the plan hasn't been set. The plan could focus on one of the alternatives, or include parts of all three of them.

Sanders said the group isn't targeting specific stores or restaurants, but trying to create a specialized business climate that would attract a large number of new retail outlets that don't have a reason to come to Sheboygan now.

"If you're trying to get Whole Foods to locate in a market, asking them nicely, providing them tax incentives, none of that's going to achieve it if they don't believe there's a long-term market there for them," Sanders said.

Ald. Mark Hanna said he has lots of reading to do in the OMNNI report, which was presented for the first time to council members and city staff Monday night, but thinks the consultants are moving in the right direction.

"We've got an underutilized area on the west side of the city and I need some time to digest what they were showing us," Hanna said. "But it was intriguing to me that they were looking at mixed use, a way to draw attention to our city by taking advantage of some natural areas that we haven't utilized yet."

Ald. Dan Verhasselt said he would like to see a "phased-in" implementation of the Taylor Drive plan, focusing first on fixing Taylor Heights.

"I'm concerned if we put a lot of emphasis down in that Schuchardt property we develop a nice beautiful oasis and we continue to stare at blighted, overgrown parking lots and rooftops that are vacant right now," Verhasselt said.

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