

## **Downtown Bismarck Sub Area Plan Implementation Task Force**

The Downtown Bismarck Sub Area Plan Implementation Task Force met at 8:30 am on May 13, 2014 in the Mayor's Conference Room on the 4<sup>th</sup> Floor of the City/County Building at 221 North 5<sup>th</sup> Street in Bismarck. Present were: Co-Chairs Commissioner Brenda Smith and Mayor John Warford along with members Larry Oswald, Kevin Ruhland, Kate Herzog, Jason Tomanek, Kelsy Ruhland, Dawn Kopp and Kayla Ver Helst. Also present was Bill Wocken.

Mayor Warford welcomed the committee members and thanked them for agreeing to serve. He invited Kelsy Ruhland and Kayla Ver Helst to share with the group their hopes for the task force's work as they were unable to attend the group's first meeting.

The minutes of the April 15, 2014 meeting were received and approved by acclamation.

By consensus the group decided the task force would meet the second Tuesday of each month at 8:30 am in the Mayor's Conference Room in the City/County Building.

Commissioner Smith asked the sub-committees appointed at the last meeting to report on their activities. Jason Tomanek chaired a group that will look at revisions to downtown zoning and planning policies and standards. He said the group had begun a rather extensive review project. He said they would first review the standards and ordinances of similar size cities and try to concentrate on items they wanted to avoid in our downtown. They were planning to seek input from area architects. Mayor Warford suggested a public input process be implemented to achieve greater citizen acceptance and involvement.

Discussion followed about the need to "brand" the downtown to create a real identity for the area. It was suggested that the geographic limits of the downtown should be expanded in every direction and that design elements should be used to link the area and create a sense of place. Banners for all seasons were suggested as a first step in this process.

Bill Wocken reported that the committee had made a press release on its first meeting and that he had followed up with some media representatives so that the task force would "come up on their radar". The web page for the city now has the historical study comments and the plan stored on it and readily available. An intuitive page address was in the development stage. More work will need to be done on this web site but it is currently established and linked to social media sites. He also reported that the TIGER grant had been submitted for the design work on the 5<sup>th</sup> street railroad underpass, ramp at 5<sup>th</sup> and Front and transit terminal. Congressional delegation support was requested and received.

Dawn Kopp and Kate Herzog reported they had met with a group to try to “harvest the low hanging fruit” in the master plan. They had discussed plans to make Main Avenue a three lane section, change of Chancellor Square from one-way to two-way traffic and the development of 5<sup>th</sup> Street south of the BNSF Railroad with the City Engineering and Public Works Departments. There are a number of challenges that will need to be worked out but the consensus was that redevelopment of 5<sup>th</sup> Street south of Front Avenue was the easiest street project to address in the short term. The committee report is attached.

In discussion this sub-committee agreed to continue looking at these roadway redevelopments and to look at the addition of seasonal banners to the downtown area. They also wanted to look into changing transit routes to tie together the downtown, library, Kirkwood Mall and the Capitol. It was suggested the CVB might be included in the efforts of this sub-committee.

The group briefly discussed ways to keep its activities in the public view. Kayla Ver Helst agreed to report for the group to the City Commission in a few weeks and to keep a regular bi-monthly briefing schedule with the Commission.

Kevin Ruhland reported he had done some research on financing for downtown housing. He said the three programs most often looked to for support for this purpose are tax increment, renaissance zone and low income housing tax credits. The Tax Increment program is an available resource but the costs to construct housing in downtown areas is higher than in outlying areas, somewhat negating the advantages of using the tax increment vehicle. There are available benefits from the Renaissance Zone in downtown Bismarck but the program is very limited in its locations due to the limits on the size of zones. The tax credit vehicle is hard to use since the tax credits are limited and in high demand.

Kevin said Grand Forks was utilizing a community land trust to increase its housing stock. He also said other cities had used a process that invited proposals for housing on city-owned lands. The lands were not sold to the highest bidder but, instead, to the proposer with the best plan to provide housing. He mentioned his firm was working with Metro Plains, a regional low and moderate housing provider, to try to determine effective housing strategies in today’s market place. He said mixed use developments using retail on the first floor and housing on upper floors is a desirable model, however the demand for downtown housing is unknown.

Larry Oswald told the group that much of the electrical service for the downtown comes through the large power substation located between Sweet and Front Avenues and between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Streets. He said most of the downtown service is accomplished with overhead lines in the alleys downtown. He noted that other utilities such as cable and

telephone also use overhead lines located on MDU power poles. Movement of the substation is under study but all indications are that it would be a very costly process. He said the substation could be a major impact to the 5<sup>th</sup> Street improvement plans.

There being no further business to come before the task force at this time, Mayor Warford declared the meeting adjourned at 10:06 am. The next meeting will be held on June 10, 2014 at 8:30 am in the Mayor's Conference Room.

Reported by Bill Wocken