

Basalt rewrites the rules for downtown plan



Basalt is preparing to launch an unconventional planning process that's expected to yield development options for three key sites in the downtown core.

A kick off session on Monday, February 24 will be the first of scores of meetings with students, business groups, neighborhood residents, developers and residents-at-large. The kick-off meeting will be held from 5:30 to 7 p.m. at the community room of the Basalt library. It's open to everyone.

"There are 150 times that you can come and say what you see for downtown," said Town Manager Mike Scanlon. "Name a group and we're trying to get them involved."

All the meetings will feature a "clean slate" aerial photograph of downtown. Three major parcels have been blanked out — the Pan and Fork Mobile Home Park, Lions Park and the Phillips 66 gas station/Clark's Market building. Participants will be urged to create drawings of what they want to see in those parcels.

"I'd love to get 1,000 pictures," Scanlon said.

Town officials hope the results lead to a revitalization plan for downtown. The theory of the process is that land-use planning usually boils down to "what does it look like?" Scanlon said. Instead of spending the time of the elected official, developers and town residents going through all the details of land use — lot line setbacks, heights, parking, housing requirements and the like — they will focus on what people want to see.

"We're basically turning the planning process around," Scanlon said.

Once the options are fleshed out, developers will be told, "build this and you don't have to wait as much," according to Scanlon. The process also could be less expensive for developers, he said.

Mayor Jacque Whitsitt, who has developed a reputation as a growth-control advocate during 12 years on the council and two years as mayor, said she prefers the new process.

“The traditional way of community planning is no community planning. It’s applicant planning,” she said.

In that process the applicant proposes a project, then government bodies and opponents usually pick it apart. According to Whitsitt, the process is expensive and generally leads to little satisfaction.

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Basalt’s alternative will engage residents to help determine what they want to see — from public spaces like parks and plazas to private places like hotels and commercial development, Whitsitt said. The current landowners can decline to sell or develop their property if their visions don’t match those that float to the top in the process, Whitsitt said. But landowners receive incentive that if they build what the public wants, they will get through the process quicker and cheaper.

“It makes so much more sense,” Whitsitt said.

The project is formally known as the Our Town Planning Process. The town has budgeted \$100,000 for the effort. A handful of consultants have been hired to help. Paul Andersen and Jim Kent and Associates will moderate chat sessions. GreenPlay will organize at least two open houses. Designer Nick Aceto was enlisted to produce drawings that highlight common themes among participants.

The trick will be condensing 1,000 visions down to a few options without alienating a significant number of participants. A peer group of business people — bankers, planners and others — will review the public input and provide Scanlon with feedback. If something is economically infeasible for a developer or the town government, the process will be adjusted before the end, according to Scanlon.

The key to success is creating a transparent and inclusive process.

“Everybody gets their place at the table to discuss their issue of interest,” Scanlon said.

Scanlon said he is convinced that factions will be willing to give up their vision as the process evolves and they learn of better ideas.

A summary meeting is currently planned for May 29. The top ideas will go to the Basalt Planning and Zoning Commission in June. The board will prioritize the options, work on details and then send recommendations to the Town Council.

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