

Downtown Fort Myers redevelopment draws a crowd



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(Photo: Todd Stubing/The News-Press)

When it comes to downtown neighborhoods, Fort Myers residents are mainly concerned with one thing: getting around.

About 70 people attended a public meeting Tuesday about the redevelopment of central Fort Myers, hoping to share ideas, visions and concerns about what the future might hold.

Central Fort Myers – which is bordered by U.S. 41, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, and Evans and Edison avenues – is home to many underused and vacant properties, and the Fort Myers Community Redevelopment Agency held the meeting to ask for public input.

But most people seemed to be concerned with being able to park, hopping on some kind of transportation and walking from place to place.

"I hope we have a very clear priority for a mode of travel," said Ann Pierce, a member of BikeWalkLee's Steering Group. "We need to make sure transportation is integrated from the very beginning."

The question of addressing the lack of parking also came up.

"I think it went very well," said Don Paight, director of the CRA, "we received some good feedback."

The area will be rebranded as "Midtown," and it includes familiar landmarks like City of Palms Park, the Fort Myers police station, the Skatium and the Imaginarium Science Center.

Midtown was established in 1990 as an extension of downtown Fort Myers, said Shellie Johnson, director of planning with EnSite, a design firm hired to assist.

But while officials intend to keep Midtown associated with downtown, they want it to have its own identity.

Creating an identity starts with attracting development with additional office space, affordable housing and retail, Paight said.

About four or five companies are interested in opening up a location in the downtown area, Paight said, but the city is having trouble finding space. Mid-rise office buildings will attract more businesses, which will in turn attract more coffee shops and eateries downtown.



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And by adding affordable housing into the mix, it will not only give downtown the population officials were originally hoping for, but it will also give downtown the balance it needs.

You don't want everyone evacuating the area come 5 p.m., Johnson said.

But some of the challenges with the Midtown area stems from vacant properties and slow development.

City of Palms Park was supposed to attract all kinds of development in the city, but it never did.

Some of the land use regulations in the area also represent barricades, Johnson said.

Some people suggested going back to the original plan of creating a destination with City of Palms Park by bulking up the sports community. A rock climbing wall and Olympic-sized swimming pool were among some of the attractions mentioned.

But it'll be a long road ahead before any changes will be made, Johnson said.

Two more public meetings are planned – one in late August for the branding concept, and one in late October for the final plan – and officials will present land use recommendations to the city council in November.

About nine months of work are ahead, but the bulk of it will come within the next several weeks, Johnson said.

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