



City of Grand Island

Tuesday, April 05, 2005

Study Session

Item -2

Presentation by Downtown Improvement Board

Steve Rasmussen, Board Member of Business Improvement District Board #5 will present a PowerPoint relative to the Downtown Plan.

Staff Contact: Cindy Johnson



Downtown

Grand Island

MEMO TO: Mayor and City Council

FROM: Business Improvement District Board #5, Downtown

RE: Downtown Plan

DATE: March 30, 2005

The downtown is an integral part of any community; it is the heart of the community. A well cared for downtown reflects a sense of commitment to the small businesses that locate in downtowns, the professional service offices. It speaks well for a community when a downtown is maintained in a progressive fashion and considered an asset to the community overall. It is encouraging that the Council identified helping downtown programs as a goal at this year's retreat and the Mayor supports major redevelopment of downtown Grand Island, as indicated in his December, 2004 'State of the City' address. We, as downtown property and business owners, appreciate the acknowledgement of downtown as a critical place within the community.

Grand Island has seen a variety of efforts to improve the downtown in the last decade. Some people, if considering the façade improvement program, alleyway program, and increased public events, may even characterize those efforts as resounding. Others, if seeing the upper level housing potential, vacant storefronts, and lack of physical improvements, may characterize that effort as mediocre. What everyone will agree on is that we can't stop here. There is more to be done and substantial improvements that need to be made if this downtown is to be redeveloped into an area the entire community can take pride in.

Downtown Grand Island is safe, stable, and family friendly. People are comfortable in our downtown. The area is not ridden with crime and does not consist of unsafe, threatening areas. It is a downtown holding its own in a time when other downtowns are losing tremendous ground. We can take pride in this and use it as a stepping-stone to continue our efforts.

ENVISIONING THE NEXT STEP

In 2004, the downtown, in conjunction with the CRA, commissioned a study that would serve as the guiding force for the future of the downtown. Many suggestions in the study have been implemented, such as angle parking, additional events, parking lot improvements, and banners. Other suggestions, including streetscape projects, increased residential units, corner nodes, development of signage, an outdoor entertainment area have not yet occurred.

The study confirms what we know about our downtown: the number of retail stores is down; restaurants are up; and office space has increased. There is a slightly higher vacancy rate today than five years ago, again, nothing that was not expected with the advent of the strip malls along highway 281 offering traditional downtown businesses an opportunity for affordable rents in a higher traffic volume area. What we did learn in the study was this.

To take this downtown to the next level, the focus must move beyond planters and pumpkin painting to physical improvements that create an atmosphere that will encourage people to flock to the downtown for an experience (unique housing, shopping, dining, and services) that they cannot receive anywhere else in Grand Island.

Our downtown has much to offer. It is the government center of the city and houses many professional services. Rates are reasonable and office space is filling up. Restaurants are convenient and it's easy to pop into one of the many unique shops in the area.

But, it is the "traffic" – the people shopping, eating, living, procuring services, that is crucial to the success of businesses individually, and the downtown overall. What can we do to increase the number of people coming to the downtown; which equates to increased business for our companies located downtown? The study by RDG would suggest that the public encouragement for increasing foot traffic and business to the downtown occurs via any number of avenues but all centering around creating an "ambiance" or "experience" that will bring people back to the downtown time and again. This foot traffic will be the enticer for more niche businesses to open up shop in the downtown area. The ambiance sets downtown apart from the strip malls, and the hard concrete of Highway 281, and makes it an enjoyable, different place to go.

Here's what we believe must be undertaken as the next steps in the downtown:

ACTIVITIES = PEOPLE = TRAFFIC = BUSINESS

Over the years, the downtown has coordinated many events as a way to bring people, families, and friends into an area that they might not otherwise have reason to visit. The logic behind this strategy is simple. The events expose people to the downtown, and with that exposure comes a familiarity and, hopefully, an interest in returning to the downtown – to one of the shops, eating establishments or entertainment venues.

The board remains committed to sponsoring events and to make them even more successful by “*theming*” and encouraging greater participation from a variety of businesses. The downtown would like to establish a programming schedule, which includes music groups of all types and sizes, family entertainment such as clowns, jugglers, face painters, and dancing. With this in mind, the events must be held in a family friendly area, conducive to music, movement, and interaction.

DEVELOPMENT AS AN ENTERTAINMENT/ACTIVITIES CENTER.

Gazebo Park Area. The gazebo park area must be redeveloped. The gazebo structure itself does not contribute to the “Kaufmann Cummings Park”, and is seldom used. Opening up this area also exposes all the available parking in the northern area of downtown (South Front Street)

Physical layout:

- Grass knoll, not concrete
- Performance site
- Banners
- Signage
- Seating

Assistance Needed

- Address rail road issues
Automated horn system
Crossings
- Restrooms
- Electricity, lighting

Indoor Downtown Community Area. The Grand Theatre is an integral part of encouraging downtown traffic. It brings a life and vitality to the

downtown and encourages great discussions over coffee and cheesecake at Blue Moon or a refreshing beverage at one of the other downtown establishments.

With the recent announcement of GILT to co-locate at College Park, efforts to assist the Grand Theatre, and to maximize its usage, must be accelerated. There appears to be an interest in utilizing the Grand for social gatherings, weddings/ receptions, parties, etc. In fact, the directors for the Grand Foundation have identified a specific niche – video birthday parties – utilizing the existing movie screen and equipment that is forthcoming. However, the existing footprint provides very little “reception” area atmosphere. Could long range plans include purchase of the adjacent building (east) and expand the Grand’s footprint?

Assistance Needed

- Annual funding from the City to support Grand Theatre operations

Arts and humanities. Along with the redevelopment of the gazebo park area, we would encourage the city to consider providing financial assistance for public arts in downtown. In conjunction with Moonshell Arts and Humanities (and perhaps funding from the Arts and Humanities Council), various works of art could be displayed throughout the year. *Sculptures, “crane mania” programs, music, performances and other appropriate art mediums could be programmed at a downtown site.* Because the gazebo park location will be the most significant “green space” in the downtown core area, this would be an ideal site for public art.

HISTORIC REDEVELOPMENT/UPPER LEVEL DEVELOPMENT

As previously noted, people are the key to business in downtown. Housing supplies people. Upper level development should be encouraged. An aggressive plan would include the partnering of various property owners downtown to collectively redevelop second stories. Efficiencies could be gained through shared elevators, walkways, etc. The effect would be tremendous - an increase in people living downtown, activity, sense of energy and excitement, and an increased need for services, resulting in more business.

The BID would identify potential sites for upper level housing; an intern is proposed to work on this effort this summer. We would develop sketches of second stories that would be conducive to housing development. A

brochure on the process/funding sources, etc for upper level housing would be developed as well.

Historic renovation/restoration can be costly, and each building is different, depending on existing infrastructure and end use. Estimates for renovation of larger downtown buildings can range from \$50,000 for upper level development to \$800,000. As you can see, return on investment must be significant in order for a downtown property owner to assume the risk for this type of redevelopment. Providing financial incentives for these types of restoration is crucial.

Assistance needed

- Revolving loan fund
 - City
 - CRA
 - CDBG loan
 - Historic Tax Credits.
- Adequate parking
- Building codes that allow restoration/renovation of downtown buildings
- Continue to make TIF available

PARKING

The downtown parking lots are maintained through parking district assessments to businesses in the parking district. Sufficient, convenient parking is the deal maker – or deal breaker - for every development and redevelopment project in the downtown. Historically, the downtown has funded the parking lots through bonds issued by the city. The city owns the lots and the parking assessments pay for the maintenance and improvements to the lots. Parking in the downtown needs to be controlled to ensure it is readily available and contributes to the overall sense of “arriving” in the downtown. Appropriately spaced parking will do this. We have identified two specific areas where parking is an absolute detriment to additional development.

Assistance Needed

- Masonic Temple (Parking could be made available if Brown Hotel/GI Music were acquired and demolished)
- Walnut Street Center (Parking could be made available if substandard properties in area were acquired and demolished)

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

We must consider RDG's suggestion relative to the widening of Third Street in order to increase the number of parking stalls available. The perception of convenient parking is often inconsistent with the reality of parking available, however, we must deal with the perception as it is and work toward changing it. Adding on-street parking has been of great help in the areas where it has been implemented. In conjunction with discussing the change to angle parking, we would ask the discussions also include streetscaping, addressing the deteriorating curbs and sidewalks, and pedestrian lighting. All components will add up to a greatly improved public environment.

CONCLUSION

Every active downtown has an attitude. Grand Island deserves a downtown bustling with activity, energy, and excitement. A solid revitalization strategy is critical. Our strategy involves a combination of small business development, encouraging creative thinking, persistence, and independence that are typical of an entrepreneur, marketing analysis, activities and events, and other responsibilities undertaken by the BID and funded through annual business improvement district assessments.

A critical prong, however, remains the public investment. A number of public needs have been identified that would ensure the continued growth and development of downtown. **Public funds are used to leverage private investment. It is not unusual to have a 3-1 or greater investment ratio (public to private) in revitalized downtowns. Private investment will occur when public investment does.**

There is no better example of this than the Riverfront Development in Omaha. Millions of dollars (\$500,000,000+) have been invested. The Hay Market is another example. A \$12 million bond issue was approved by the voters in the mid-1990s and directed toward public improvements in the downtown. Since 1997, there has been well over \$100 million in both public and private funds invested in downtown Lincoln. While Grand Island is certainly not the size of Lincoln or Omaha, our downtown is just as important.

- Connections/Access for Upper Level Development \$ _____
- Outdoor Public/Entertainment Area \$ _____

- Surface Parking, Strategically Located
- Street/Curb/Streetscape Improvements
- Restoration of Masonic Temple
- Arts/Humanities

\$ _____
\$ _____
\$ _____