

Group focuses on downtown Farmington

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moving in. And existing stores look healthy. There's not any crisis starting in the city in the face."

Some have said maintaining the status quo downtown would be too depressing, but Schultz disagrees. "I think there are things we can do, and still have the same level of activity in about the same space."

Others have said they'd like to see twice as many cars downtown — "things popping all over the place, and that's probably not attainable," Schultz said. "Farmington has the name identity, a good location. The prospects of such expansion are reasonable — if that's what people want."

It's not even farfetched to envision Farmington as a cultural center of metro Detroit, in Schultz's view. Imagine a shopping district ringed by offices, a theater, a skating rink, and plenty of people space. "I don't think a crossroads can aspire to that. But downtown Farmington certainly could," Schultz said.

SUPPORT FROM the community has been heartening, Schultz added. More than 30 people have turned out for steering committee meetings in recent months. And building improvements are in the works at many downtown locations.

By late fall, Schultz hopes the steering committee will assume more responsibility — reviewing new legislation, pursuing government grants, luring private investment.

Criteria for visual improvements — "without trampling on property rights" also must be established, Schultz said. Meanwhile, the city soon will have \$60,000 to loan at low interest for facade improvements.

But first, Schultz said, "we need to sign a contract with the Oakland County Department of Community Development. We need to have a local system for evaluating applications and making recommendations to the county. And we need to develop controls on appearance improvements."

Whether the steering committee should become involved in recruiting a certain type of tenant when a down-

town vacancy occurs also needs to be discussed, Schultz said.

SCHULTZ DOESN'T see the steering committee becoming downtown's rallying force just yet. As he put it: "You've got to earn power and authority."

Meanwhile, the accent is on cooperation — in advertising, in promotion, in maintenance. "If that requires a staff, so be it. If it requires raising money, so be it," Schultz said. "That's the lesson of the Michigan Main Street Program."

That program employs the National Trust Historic Preservation's National Main Street Center four-point approach:

- Organizing uniform objectives and long-term planning.
- Promoting the central business district as a place to live, work, shop, gather and invest.
- Enhancing the CBD's visual appearance, including signs, buildings and landscaping.
- Strengthening the CBD's economic base.

THE STEERING committee grew

out of City Manager Robert Deadman's bid to avoid a repeat of downtown's downturn in the mid-1970s, when a 70,000-square-foot department store closed and another 30,000 square feet of retail space stood empty.

Hard work and abiding faith in downtown Farmington helped turn things around. "About a year ago, the city manager said it's time to take another look," Schultz said.

In a February report to the city council, Deadman wrote: "This effort should provide a program which will aid owners, merchants and the community to maintain a viable central business district into the 1990s."

To help set the stage, the city has hired urban planner Christopher Wzancy and marketing consultant Nick Ni-

colas to prepare a series of seminars. The seminars are designed to — in Schultz's words — "help raise the level of conversation about downtown to a more knowledgeable and sophisticated level."

AS SCHULTZ sees it, the city has at least two options:

- Asking the city planner to update the downtown improvement plan drawn up in the mid-1970s.
- Asking some sort of downtown-based organization to draw up a new improvement plan.

Schultz favors the second choice. "That would be more likely to succeed."

Still unanswered is what form such an organization would take, who would serve on it and what its charge would be.

Heading the downtown steering committee's four subcommittees are: Executive Officer Supply owner Robert Christ (consumers), Farmington Civic Center owner Gregory Hobler (services), Farmington Area Chamber of Commerce executive director Jodi Soronen (communications), and local architect Carl Galster and downtown resident Richard Gundlach (beautification).

The steering committee will meet next in mid-October, the date to be announced.

Downtown needs in spotlight

By Bob Sklar
staff writer

Take it from Harry Wingerter, owner of the Bon Ton Shoppe: "Shopping should be an experience — and that's something downtown Farmington can provide."

"People love to come to downtown Farmington — and we don't want to lose that," said Wingerter, who chairs the 13-member downtown steering committee.

However, he acknowledges, there are problems — "the traffic on Grand River, the need for improved facades, the need for more parking on the north side of Grand River."

There's a need to make the central business district more pedestrian-oriented, perhaps with more benches and plantings, Wingerter said. "And we need an overall promotional plan."

Wingerter is determined to help "make downtown a central place for people to come together. We've got to re-establish the feeling of downtown being the community hub."

Why now?

"We just feel it's time," Wingerter said. "So many other communities are doing downtown improvements. We don't want to fall back."

- Downtown Farmington is serving a role of convenience — you wouldn't otherwise make it a destination.
- Downtown Farmington offers no market focal point — it needs a magnet, a centerpiece.
- Downtown Farmington must interlink market zones and landmarks to better accommodate pedestrians.
- Downtown Farmington's streetscape needs to be thematically oriented to the community's character.
- Downtown Farmington's existing businesses must reembrace to reflect changing lifestyles.

SOME OF the specialty marketing segments on a steady path in downtown Farmington, according to the report, are: health and fitness, do-it-yourself, communications, office services, self-education, business conferences and meetings, food courts and banquets.

"Retailing is a critical element to downtown's revitalization program, but it can't lead the pack. Office spaces, conference centers, retail units, health and fitness, inn/motel concepts and apartment residential units are keys to a renewed urban environment," the report stated.

The highest-grossing stores are in downtowns because that's where there is a multiplicity of market segments: residents, workers, visitors, businesspeople, transients, municipal services. "It's market piled upon market," the report stated.

There's a return to living in the city, particularly among single people (of all ages) and the affluent.

"These people must be served with convenient, upscale retail/service centers and an environment based on quality," the report said.

"Retail must be theatrical to be effective," it said.

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AMONG THE points highlighted in the Downtown Farmington Function Analysis Focus Report, prepared by Christopher Wzancy & Associates of Birmingham and Nicholas and Co. management consultants of West Bloomfield Township:

- Downtown Farmington needs a repositioning of its stodgy, tired and conventional image.
- Downtown Farmington has a stable retail/service mix serving a limited local market.

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