

DDA adopts preliminary downtown plan

By Casey Hans
staff writer

Six enhancement projects for downtown Farmington were approved June 24 involving pedestrian walkways, parking improvements, ornamental lighting, marketing and maintenance, parks and property acquisitions.

Now the Farmington Downtown Development Authority board must find a way to pay for them.

The projects were adopted by the DDA directors as part of a working

draft of a five-year development plan by the city administration. It coincides with a strategic plan of goals adopted by the DDA board last April.

City Planner Christopher Wazny will propose a more detailed plan — including a map with priorities — during the next several weeks, to be considered by the DDA at its next meeting in August, according to officials. Wazny's report will also give final project estimates so the board can consider financing options.

CITY ADMINISTRATORS and

DDA directors said the downtown redevelopment was going more slowly than expected.

DDA Chairman Harry Wingert called the process "slow as molasses." Despite the lack of speed, board members present appeared pleased with the proposed projects.

"A mission like the DDA's has the nature of chess; they are never finally finished, but rather require constant attention," administrative assistant for the city Robert Schultz, said in his report. He told the DDA board that merchants and property

owners will ultimately "have to assume the responsibility for downtown maintenance."

Projects adopted by the DDA include:

- Improving the pedestrian system, including lighting, paving materials, signs, furnishings and plantings, so they are safe and interesting. This project also includes defining current deficiencies and gaps and selecting a walkway style.

- Improving parking by resurfacing the municipal lot on the north side of Grand River and purchasing property north of Grand River and west of Warner for additional parking.

- Installing new, low-level lighting to help build an identity and make walkways safe. The DDA adopted a lighting style, and the city planner will propose locations for these lights in his final plan.

- Employing a professional staff or consultants to monitor and tie the program together.

- Renewing current landscape islands, adding new islands and considering the addition of public sculpture.

- Acquiring property, including vacant property northeast of the post office, single family housing along Orchard Street and Grand River, and other parcels.

"We ought to know by December what we're doing and where we're going," Farmington City Manager Robert Deadman told the DDA board.

THOSE FINANCING options involving public hearings — special assessments, city bonding or the use of tax increment financing — will probably be decided upon sometime in September, said Schultz, author of the working draft.

If the DDA proposes a TIFA for financing the downtown project, an ordinance would have to be drafted by the city council before Dec. 31 in order to recapture tax increases from the previous year's assessments, Schultz added.

Based on a projected "conservative" 5 percent rise in state equalized values of property in Farmington during each of the next five years and an estimated \$100,000 in new construction each year, Schultz projected an estimated \$708,423

could be raised under a TIFA.

Schultz's projections call for an increase from the city's current \$7.66 million level to \$11.66 million, according to his report.

The city report suggests that a TIFA could be used for most of the improvements, while special assessments could be used for some of the lighting, physical maintenance and consulting requirements needed for the DDA project.

The 2 percent tax levy, which can be initiated by the DDA board and approved by the city council without public hearing, would generate only about \$24,000 per year maximum, and could be used for administrative staffing requirements. It was suggested.

Planner payment OK'd

City planner Christopher Wazny will be paid \$9,000 to complete a comprehensive development plan for Farmington's central business district.

His fee, to be paid from Community Development Block Grant money, was approved Monday by a 4-0 vote of the Farmington City Council. Councilman Alton Bennett was absent.

"The staff has verified . . . the price is well within the going rate for the design component of a downtown development plan," according to a city report to the council.

The plan is being coordinated through the city's Downtown Development Authority. It is required by Public Act 197 — which allows the

formation of DDAs — before bonds can be issued or a tax increment financing plan can be adopted.

The DDA board is considering several projects requiring such long-term financing, including sidewalk renovation, low-level lighting and landscaping throughout the central business district, according to the report.

Wazny has acted as city planner and consultant on a year-long downtown marketing study of the downtown area, and is familiar with the city's needs, the report said. To date, consulting costs of \$13,000 have been paid by federal CDBG funds.

IN DECEMBER 1984, Wazny recommended the city develop a

marketing strategy which included a merchant organization and that the downtown be renovated. He projected a \$41,000 cost for research and design, according to the report. The city did the work with city staff, establishing an organizational framework and conducting market analyses for the downtown.

The formal development plan is expected to come before the DDA within the next month for consideration. The DDA board adopted a working plan recently for the downtown rejuvenation.

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