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[Home](#) > Main Street plan has support

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Concord

Residents speak in favor, pose questions

Proposals to reduce Main Street from four lanes to three have stirred debate on whether it's worth spending millions to upgrade downtown in the name of economic development. But comments made last night after a presentation on the plans suggest more than a few people are already sold.

"After this project is realized, we really need to focus our attention on the upstairs," architectural designer Anthony Mento said, referring to the undeveloped upper stories of downtown buildings.

Not everyone who attended last night's public information session at Red River Theatres spoke with as much certainty about the estimated \$8.25 million project coming to fruition - or delved into what the community should tackle next. But the crowd, which filled a room at Red River, was largely receptive to the idea of a revamped downtown streetscape.

Driving those plans is citizens group Concord 2020, which will use what's left of its soon-to-expire federal grant to hire a consultant to make a recommendation for Main Street.

"This is a great opportunity," said developer Steve Duprey. "We would be making a mistake as a community if we don't avail ourselves of it."

Since the idea of a reworked Main Street gained new life last fall, the city, Concord 2020 and nonprofit Main Street Concord have been floating plans to members of the community and city councilors, citing a need to draw people downtown and stimulate development.

At a recent meeting, councilors put the project among their priorities for the next two years - a move that Mayor Jim Bouley said could help secure a federal grant to cover 80 percent of the project's cost.

Last night marked the first of three public information sessions, which began with a presentation from 2020 Executive Director Jennifer Kretovic and Main Street Concord Executive Director Jessica Eshleman.

They showed renderings of what the downtown could become - whether that meant fewer lanes, wider sidewalks, landscaped medians or simply more trees and updated streetlights - and told their audience their feedback would be essential as consultants began their work.

"We can't do this project without your input," Kretovic said.

After the presentation, the questions for Kretovic and Eshleman were plenty:

What projections had been made for the cost of labor?

Would the plans preserve the downtown's historic character?

And what about shutting down Main Street to cars entirely?

The city's assistant for special projects, Matt Walsh, said federal grants don't require labor wages higher than what construction workers make across the state. Eshleman said the consulting team chosen would include someone focused on historic preservation.

And as far as a car-free Main Street, the idea has been suggested in the past, "and it's been suggested this time around," Kretovic said. She said consultants will consider that possibility.

One of the lone voices of skepticism was Roy Schweiker, a frequent presence at city meetings. Schweiker said he feared fewer lanes on Main Street would mean more cars cutting through neighborhoods.

And he said the vision for downtown, while "far more attractive" than its present state, suggested something elitist: Main Street as "a gated community."

"What happens if after five years, 10 years, things go sour?" he asked, referring to struggles he said merchants in Laconia faced after that city remade its Main Street.

But few in the room last night seemed to share his concern.

"I like the concept: 'Build it and they will come,' " said resident Dave Teune. But he said the city could accomplish the same goals if the upper stories were developed - leading to something like an "artist colony."

Eshleman pointed out that Duprey's upcoming project at the Sanel Block includes an agreement to sell land to CATCH Neighborhood Housing, which is planning an affordable housing building with preference in half of the units given to artists.

Still, if there were more opportunities for second-floor housing now, Teune said, "You would drive people downtown today."

Teune said after the meeting that he spends time downtown and can't help but notice the empty upper stories.

"To see all that dead glass - I hate it," he said.

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