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An intriguing new idea for Main Street

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Editorial

Mayor Jim Bouley, Concord 2020 and Main Street Concord are betting on the notion that if we build it, they will come. "It" might be a narrowed, tree-lined, two-lane Main Street divided by a landscaped median and a downtown with broad, heated sidewalks. "They" would be tenants in the newly created apartments and condominiums on the upper floors of downtown buildings; more shops, art galleries, restaurants, taverns, shoppers and customers; and much less plausibly, tourists.

It is an idea worth exploring, but changing the Main Street streetscape is only one among many improvements that have been talked about for years.

Among the others: moving or lowering Interstate 93 to connect downtown to the river; relocating the city's library to Storrs Street; finding a downtown site for Merrimack County Superior Court; refurbishing and extending Storrs Street; and putting the site of the downtown strip mall to better use.

Is reconfiguring Main Street the highest priority on the city's wish list or the redevelopment project that would do the most to spur economic development downtown and make Concord more prosperous? Maybe not. But it's the only project that - if the city acts quickly - has a good chance of being paid for primarily with federal money and completed soon.

As envisioned by its backers, the downtown renewal project would cost \$8.25 million with 80 percent of that paid for by a federal transportation grant. Since \$1.25 million of the city's \$1.65 million share of the project is already in the budget, the impact on taxpayers would be small and the payoff in increased downtown property values could be substantial. Downtown real estate makes up one-quarter of the city's \$4 billion in taxable property tax exempt property is valued at \$1 billion. That makes \$8.25 million, though it may sound like a lot of money, a small investment to upgrade an enormous asset.

As Bouley said in his sales pitch to the Monitor editorial board last week, do nothing and Concord's downtown will stagnate. Despite storefronts made vacant by the recession, Concord's downtown is far healthier than that of many communities. That is, in good measure, because the city has continually invested in making it a more attractive place to be by building Bicentennial and Eagle Squares, adding parking garages, redeveloping the Firehouse Block, permitting overnight parking, and by making downtown attractive to developers willing to invest in big projects like the Capital Commons.

There are a lot of "ifs" to the plan. If the proponents of reconfiguring Main Street produce a clear vision of what they intend to do and what they believe it will accomplish; if the plan wins the support of downtown businesses; if the federal grant can be secured, and if parking challenges can be met, the gamble is worth taking. A growing number of empty-nesters in big homes have expressed a desire to live in America's downtowns if they are beautiful and thriving. That's true in Concord as well. But lots of communities have made similar changes to redevelop their Main Streets in hopes of luring people downtown and stimulating the economy. In some places the effort was an overwhelming success. In others, a flop.

Proponents of Concord's Main Street reconfiguration won't be able to guarantee that they will get the results they want. But they will have to make a strong case that if we build it, they will come.

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