October workshops to focus on neighborhood issues

Finding solutions to neighborhood issues and creating a neighborhood center will be the focus of the next Destination Midtown workshops.

The two-evening workshops will be held from 6:30 to 9 p.m., Tuesday and Wednesday, Oct. 14-15 at the TAC Building, rooms 5060-61-62, 3215 Cuming St.

The first night, the workshop will focus on finding solutions to the issues raised during the previous sessions, including housing rehabilitation, code enforcement, public safety and neighborhood planning.

Doug Bisson, Destination Midtown project manager, said the workshop will also focus on available resources. He hopes to have area bankers to present on financial resources such as rehabilitation loans and small business loans. Diedra Andrews, executive director of the Neighborhood Center for Greater Omaha, will discuss resources available at the center.

On Wednesday, the focus will be an interactive design activity: creating a neighborhood center.

“A neighborhood center is a mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented environment with opportunities for people to live, work, shop and play,” said Bisson.

“It’s like Main Street – a place where a concentration of uses brings people together to fulfill everyday needs. Dundee, Benson and the Old Market are examples.”

Bisson said plans for the evening workshop include an opportunity for participants to look at possible locations for such a center and how it might be designed.

“This is a unique opportunity for midtown residents to become involved in shaping the future of this area,” Bisson said.

First design workshop a success

Like many people who reside in midtown Omaha, Ron Frey appreciates the positive intentions of the Destination Midtown project. He also understands that improvements to the midtown area will not take place overnight.

“I’m excited and apprehensive,” said Frey, president of the Gifford Park Neighborhood Association and a midtown resident for the past eight years. “We’re excited that attention is being given to our part of town. This has been a great collaboration between the business community and the neighborhood community.

“But I also know that they’re working on ideas, and it’s part of a long process. That’s the hardest part for people in our neighborhood to understand.”

Frey was among 100 people who attended the final presentation on Aug. 28, which capped the four-day Destination Midtown design workshop that featured daily opportunities for public input and review.

The first workshop’s final presentation by James Moore, Ph.D., community design principal for HDR, involved midtown roads and their current usage. Dodge and Leavenworth streets are the most important roads to the midtown area, Dr. Moore said. He also proposed that Harney and Farnam roads return to two-way traffic.

“The biggest liabilities are the Dodge and Leavenworth corridors and Saddle Creek to some extent,” Dr. Moore said.

“Priority has been given to moving cars through the area as opposed to controlling them and helping to strengthen the area.”

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First design workshop wraps up

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“We believe that the opportunities are to get a handle on what’s happening on Dodge and Leavenworth, and then return Farnam and Harney to their original two-way condition, thereby making them slightly more friendly or neighborhood-oriented.”

Dr. Moore said there are 15,000 people per day on the grounds of UNMC and The Nebraska Medical Center, plus another 6,000 at Mutual of Omaha.

“That’s a staggering amount of people,” Dr. Moore said. “But they’re clearly not spending much time in the surrounding areas. I know that these organizations have employee cafeterias and people only have a 30-minute break, but nonetheless, there’s an opportunity there that’s not being met.”

Jim Ducey, who grew up in Dundee and returned to the area a few years ago after living in west Omaha, is excited about the Destination Midtown project.

“They’re coming up with some really good ideas that will make midtown Omaha really vibrant and appealing to the people who live and work in the area,” he said. “I think many of the concerns that I have personally are being worked out through the planning process.”

Ducey has a particular interest in birds and has been impressed with the fact that, during the first few months of the project, a habitat restoration area has already been established in Hanscom Park.

“By in large, the vast majority of the 3.6-square-mile area is in pretty good shape. It contains beautiful neighborhoods and gorgeous architecture,” Dr. Moore said. “But there are far too many surface parking lots. We’re trained to look at them and think, ‘What can that be when it grows up?’ Eventually, it makes more sense to build something that will generate some revenue and bring more people to the area.”

Doug Bisson, Destination Midtown Project Manager, said the design team came up with some great ideas that will improve the area and address the issues raised in previous meetings. “We’re confident that these ideas can make the midtown area an even more attractive area in which to live and work,” he said.

E-mail your suggestions and comments to: destinationmidtown@omahachamber.org