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Bryant to Jump-Start Downtown

by Aziza Musa | July 7, 2014

Donning orange vests, Bryant city officials and planning consultants took to the streets in February.

The group toured the city, walking up and down sidewalks on Reynolds Road, envisioning what could be. That same week, the consultants heard from residents and business owners on what they wanted to see if the city were to revitalize its downtown.

Bryant was one of four cities late last year to receive a \$200,000 Metroplan Jump Start grant to redevelop a part of its community. The others were Conway, Little Rock and North Little Rock, which received one for the Levy community and another for the Park Hill neighborhood. The grants are part of a long-range project, known as Imagine Central Arkansas, to build on the metropolitan area.

The Saline County city is using the money to help redevelop a downtown -- set between Southeast Fourth Street to the south, Northwest Fourth Road to the north, Laurel Street to the east and South Oak Street to the west -- according to Metroplan. Currently, Bryant doesn't have a downtown or town center where families can gather, Mayor Jill Dabbs said.

"This is an opportunity to discuss it -- to have a conversation and explore whether this is something that Bryant should look into," she said. "We're still taking comments on preliminary plans on what the Gateway group [the Dallas-based consultants] presented."

The grant, which covers planning assistance led by a consultant group, comes at a time when Saline County and Bryant's populations are growing. In 2000, 9,764 people lived in the city, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Ten years later, the city grew to 16,688 people-- making up about 15 percent of the county's population -- and the federal agency expected the city to have more than 19,000 residents by the end of 2013.

"Planning is important, but it is more important when you're growing at the pace you are," Dabbs said. "It gives us an opportunity as a community to really talk about our future and how it relates to our past."

In two February meetings, city officials, business owners and residents heard presentations for an urban downtown plan and brainstormed revitalization ideas. Proposed changes included hiking and biking connections between parks, restaurants and a unique shopping experience, and a pedestrian and bicycle crossing over the railroad.

"Most of the people that showed up were family-oriented, that came there with their kids," said Dana Poindexter, Dabbs' assistant, who is helping with the Jump Start efforts. "They're looking for a place to meet."

The residents said they wanted a place to sit outdoors with family, have meals, listen to live music, even go to some museums, Poindexter said. They want safe walking paths for their children along with connections between the parks and trails.

"It's important to know that this is really vision-casting," Poindexter said. "This is the history of Bryant, and we're creating the legacy. This process is to really get the city involved and the people involved. Let's make this a place that everyone wants to be in."

It's a great thing to be planning for the future, Bryant Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Rae Ann Fields said. "If we don't really plan for our future, when we're growing at this rate, then we've missed a huge opportunity. You can do a lot of streetscaping and landscaping and revitalization, but you got to have the draw to get the people down there, too," Fields said.

"You can say all day long, 'We need a coffee shop,' but if you don't have a draw -- a tourist attraction -- you're not going to have a coffee shop make it."

Fields, who has led the chamber for 16 years, said the city needs "something akin to a museum or a performance venue or a sculpture garden." The chamber director offered up ideas during the public meetings and later said that most people understood that the city "probably need[ed] something more."

What has been depicted so far, Dabbs said, is better streetscape that is more pedestrian friendly and that connects Bryant High School to the downtown area.

"That would certainly be a draw," she said, adding that the city is still taking comments on the consultants' preliminary plans.

Schools and housing affordability attract people to a city, said Richard Magee, Metroplan deputy director and director of planning. The more housing a city gets, the greater the attraction for businesses, he said.

The consultants, he said, are working to bring the concepts to paper and then start putting the regulatory measures in place. They plan to present to the city a market analysis later this month that will show growth projections, what types of businesses the area could attract and sustain and how much income could be generated from those businesses, he said.

Metroplan and the firm plan to have the refined designs for each of the projects by December 2014.

"A pretty picture is a pretty picture," he said. "But getting all the details of the picture, it takes hours. [The consultants] are more concerned about how buildings are built and placement of the building than what is placed inside. Usage can change. Physical and structure change is very little. It takes years to change again."