

From Times Record

Fort Smith Downtown Planners Bridge Touchy Subjects

John Lovett | July 20, 2016

Riverfront development, an expanded trolley service and semi-truck traffic dominated discussion Tuesday in a Propelling Downtown Forward planning session with the Central Business Improvement District Commission.

Scott Polikov, president of Gateway Planning in Dallas, and his associates have met with several city commissions and economic development groups this week to gather ideas for a more detailed urban development plan that expands on the city's Future Fort Smith comprehensive plan.

Taking into consideration future construction of the U.S. Marshals Museum on Riverfront Drive and myriad other things related to traffic and housing will be required for the planners.



A truck travels along the 300 block of Garrison Avenue in downtown Fort Smith on Tuesday, July 19, 2016. BRIAN D. SANDERFORD/TIMES RECORD

Complimenting the CBID on its extensive work so far, including the new “splash pad” downtown, Polikov slowly got to one of the more touchy issues that many on the commission feel is crucial to make the downtown area more inviting to walkers, shoppers and diners: Trucking.

Polikov said he has already felt some progress and urged the commission to allow them to serve as a sort of “diplomat corps” with local businesses. The planners have been retained with private funding, including \$50,000 from the CBID, through the nonprofit group 64/6 Downtown.

Commissioner Rodney Ghan of R.H. Ghan & Cooper Commercial Properties indicated the commission has been met with resistance in the recent past when attempting to negotiate with local businesses to reroute truck traffic. Ghan, who said he speaks as a citizen who lives downtown, has suggested diverting semi-truck traffic between dinner hours 6-10 p.m. on Thursday, Friday Saturday to decrease noise.

Neumeier's Rib Room, 424 Garrison Ave., is at the corner of South Fifth Street and is an example of how truck traffic interferes with dining downtown.

Lance Thompson, general manager at Neumeier's, said something to help alleviate the strain of the truck traffic would be to simply add a turning light at the intersection of Fifth and Garrison for trucks driving from Wheeler Avenue to Garrison Avenue.

Garrison Avenue is also U.S. 64 and connects to Oklahoma over the Arkansas River.

“It’s so busy at times the traffic is backed up through Rogers on the south side because one northbound truck has to wait until an orange light to turn,” Thompson said. “There was an accident here just a week ago because of it.”

Rogers Avenue is one block south from Garrison Avenue.

Thompson said since Neumeier’s has an outdoor patio with live music, he would like to see a way to redirect truck traffic on Garrison Avenue around the building entirely.

The CBID has met with representatives of OK Foods in the past with little luck in mediating a solution. The poultry product producers heavily rely on the downtown truck route and say rerouting will add substantially to the cost of shipping their products.

CBID Commissioner Phil White, president of General Pallets, said he directs his trucks away from downtown and residential areas like the Belle Grove Historic District.

“If you solve that truck problem this month, we’ll be home free by the end of the year,” White told Polikov. “You have a big burden on your shoulders to be the mediator.”

White said all of the downtown planning “all comes back to trucks” and he considers it pivotal to smoothly connecting Garrison Avenue to its five quadrants: East, West, Belle Grove Historic District, Museum District and the riverfront.

Gateway Planning will look at all of the intersections downtown, Polikov told the CBID, with the understanding that Fort Smith is a regional center. The intersections of Garrison with First through 10th streets were deemed a priority.

Leveraging connections to Grand Avenue, returning A and B streets to two-way corridors, turning Garrison Avenue into a boulevard with a median, and creation of a marina on the riverfront were also CBID suggestions to planners.

John McIntosh of 64.6 Downtown said the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers gave “tentative approval” for a marina on the Arkansas River in Fort Smith in 1996.

Advice on what empty buildings downtown could be used for, and parking management alternatives are also planning goals.

“Our community downtown needs walkability,” CBID Chairman Richard Griffin said. “There are now about 100 residents living directly downtown and walkability is very important.”

Griffin pointed out that both A and B streets were two-way roads for many years, and “B Street ought to be part of Grand Avenue.”

Gathering data on traffic signals at the downtown intersections, studying the possibility of stop signs instead of traffic signals, and condensing previous traffic studies are also part of the job lined out for Gateway.

There was no mention at the meeting of the possibility a future Interstate 49 bridge from Alma to Barling could help redirect industrial truck traffic from downtown in the event some businesses relocated to Chaffee Crossing. A request to fund more than \$27 million in preliminary engineering for the I-49 bridge is included in the draft 2016-20 State Transportation Improvement Plan. The CBID and Ivy Owen of the Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority recently announced they will work together on economic development strategies.

River Area 51

Penny Packard of Fort Smith spoke in favor of continued efforts to develop 51 acres on Riverfront Drive into soccer fields. As noted in the commission's June 30 meeting minutes, the project is currently going through a cultural study with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Office to "ensure that there is no negative impact on Trail of Tears artifacts." Once that is complete, the project for two soccer fields and restroom will be ready to let for bids.

The city's Parks and Recreation Department has been awarded a \$224,000 grant from the Arkansas State Highway Commission for the 2.5-miles Rice Garden Levee Trail project along the Arkansas River. Plans and specifications drawn up by the city's Engineering Department are awaiting approval by the highway commission before the project can be bid out, according to Aaron Lee at the Parks and Recreation Department.

Trolley Talk

Ideas to expand the trolley train tracks farther downtown, across Garrison and toward the Miss Laura's Visitor Center was also expressed at the meeting. David Kerr, a member of the Fort Smith Historic District Commission and Fort Smith Trolley Museum secretary, said there have been plans for years to expand the trolley service but "it's all about the money." Following an expansion over the past year to Seventh Street, the trolley current terminates at Rogers Avenue.

"We have plans to go across Garrison Avenue to Belle Grove and B Street," Kerr said.

There is also a goal of the trolley becoming a part of the transit system.

Background

The CBID funding will help create a new partnership between 64/6 Downtown, the nonprofit organization behind the Unexpected Project: Festival of Murals, and Gateway Planning of Dallas. About \$30,000 is left to be raised for the total cost of about \$258,000, according to 64/6 Downtown representative Mitch Minnick, who also serves as the executive director of the Fort Smith Housing Authority.

In the works since fall 2014 with input from the CBID commission and the Fort Smith Regional Chamber of Commerce's CEO Commission, Propelling Downtown Forward is an initiative that stems from the Future Fort Smith comprehensive planning efforts that bolstered feelings on downtown being the "heartbeat of the city."

