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Mansfield eyes tax reinvestment zone for downtown improvements

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By ROBERT CADWALLADER
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MANSFIELD -- When the little city of Roanoke decided it needed an economic boost, it hired a consultant and put a \$10 million new face on its dreary downtown strip.

Completed last year, a 10-block stretch of Oak Street is now lined with lush trees and plants, extra-wide sidewalks, new restaurants and shops, and new facades on old buildings, giving residents and visitors lots more to see and do. Also, property values along the street have more than tripled since 2006, said City Manager Jimmy Stathatos.

"When you dress up a downtown, it brings out so much pride from residents and former residents," said Stathatos, whose city of 8,000 people is flanked by Fort Worth to the west and Trophy Club to the east. "I've been here almost 15 years, and this is the best project the city has done, in my opinion."

He'd get no argument from Mansfield officials, who have downtown aspirations of their own. The city is using the same consultant, Gateway Planning Group of Fort Worth, which impressed officials not only with its Roanoke work but also downtown projects in McKinney and other cities.

Mansfield's project will be broader in scope and cost much more than Roanoke's. It will be financed over years through a special entity known as a tax increment reinvestment zone. Its purpose is to make aesthetic and infrastructural improvements that will attract new investment.

The zone would establish a geographic boundary around the downtown area and identify needed improvements. It wouldn't increase property taxes paid by any business or individual in the zone, officials point out. Instead, it would set a base line property value in the district, using 2012 tax values as the floor.

Over time, the rising property values would generate tax revenues that would be directed into a fund that would be administered by a City Council-appointed board.

"It will be pay-as-you-go," said Gateway senior associate Jayashree Narayana. "You identify projects and prioritize them, and then [build them] as the money comes in."

A downtown facelift

The wish list is long, including streetscape improvements such as lighting, sidewalks, wheelchair ramps and landscaping. Also needed are signs to direct motorists to parking spaces, some of which were recently added and not easily visible from Main Street. Too, the city's park master plan calls for a connecting trail from Walnut Creek Linear Park to downtown.

"There possibly could be some additional public space, like a downtown plaza or square," Narayana added. "The city does own some property in some locations, so obviously those would be low-hanging fruit for redevelopment."

To set a 2012 property value base line, the council has to approve the entire plan by Dec. 31. The staff has set a goal to have a draft of the boundaries and potential improvement projects ready by the Oct. 1

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council meeting, Planning Director Felix Wong said.

While early programs have spruced up the centerpiece of downtown -- the 100 block of North Main Street -- the reinvestment zone will reach well beyond roughly north to the Main Street overpass, south to about a half mile past the Hunt Street signal, west to Third or Fourth Avenue and east about to the Union Pacific Railroad crossing at East Broad Street.

"It hasn't been refined," Wong said. "It hasn't been determined if the boundary meets state traffic requirements."

Well-used tool

Such tax districts relatively common in North Texas.

Fort Worth has 10 that are still active, including zones that helped finance downtown improvements and supported development of Texas Motor Speedway, according to the city's website.

Four of Arlington's six are still active, including those funding improvements for the downtown and entertainment district and infrastructure for the Arlington Highlands retail complex on Interstate 20 and the Viridian master-planned community in far north Arlington.

Reinvestment zones often are set up to run 10, 20 or 30 years, depending on how rapidly the tax revenues are expected to grow. Mansfield also has a 30-year, 3,100-acre zone, approved by the council in 2006. It includes the future sites of two major mixed-use developments known as The Reserve at Mansfield and The Shops at Broad Street, located at U.S. 287 and East Broad Street.

The plans have been mostly dormant since the economic downturn began.

Narayana expects faster development of the downtown zone.

"We hope it will be different because you have existing businesses and development," she said. "It's not a green field."

Downtown merchants, a few of whom have already started painting and sprucing up their storefronts, hope the effort will shine some needed spotlight on them.

"There are so many people who step in here who didn't even know there was something down here," said Melisa Perez, owner of MaryLou's Sandwich Shoppe. said. "It's just sad. But I've lived in Mansfield pretty much my entire life, and I'm excited to see something happening."

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