

Facelift for Broadway

Plan proposes public plaza, restrictions on building height

BY DAVID HUTTON, THE STARPHOENIX JANUARY 20, 2010



Broadway Business Improvement District director Gale Hagblom (left) with communications co-ordinator Charlene Roberts stand on a Broadway area rooftop

Photograph by: Richard Marjan, The StarPhoenix

A long-awaited plan for the Broadway district that includes a proposed nine-storey building height restriction, ideas to bring to life blighted back alleys and the creation of several large public plazas will be presented tonight.

The Broadway area has resisted such overarching plans for several years, often amid bitter neighbourhood disputes. Mark Bobyn, president of the Nutana Community Association, said given the history of false starts and public feuds, the report represents a "tremendous advancement" on what were once considered "untouchable issues."

"We were very fortunate to have this process take place because it was a bit unusual for Saskatoon to do it this way," Bobyn said. "It was an experiment and an innovative one and it has worked nearly flawlessly.

"It has gotten to a place that the last 20 years hasn't been able to."

The report, created by Toronto-based urban planners Planning Partnership, was the end result of two years of discussion among the community association, city hall, residents and the Broadway Business Improvement District, and marks the first time this type of district planning has been undertaken in

Saskatoon.

The extensive document, titled Broadway 360, will be presented tonight at 6:30 p.m. at the Broadway Theatre. The recommendations are wide-ranging and include the transformation of the Five Corners area at Broadway Avenue and 12th Street into a public plaza and the revival of alleys with store fronts, galleries and cafes.

"It would create a much safer setting back there and build on that very European style that's already part of Broadway," Bobyne said.

For several years, the process to change regulations governing the Broadway district raised sharp divisions between business owners and residents, who were split on issues such as parking, traffic congestion and height restrictions of new developments.

The Luxe, a high-end condominium development at Broadway and Ninth Street, was particularly contentious in 2006 when developers first proposed a building up to 17 storeys. Some residents and history buffs protested the demolition of a historical building on the site and said the new condos would be out of place with Broadway's historical character.

The development, which is nearing completion, is seven storeys, including 1 1/2 floors of retail space.

While the planing process leading to the new report has been successful, it remains "three-quarters of the way there," said Karl Miller of Meridian Developments, the builder behind the Luxe.

"The process started off with very good intentions," Miller said. "We said let's get through these issues and let's tackle them and let's try and settle these things once and for all. Where the report fell short is we didn't reach consensus on some issues."

"We're missing the last step and now what we're hoping is the city will take it through to that last step."

Miller said a divide remains over parking, which the report says is adequate with 1,500 spaces in the area but underutilized, and over the proposed height requirements on new developments.

The building height needs to be lowered from the current 26-storey standard, but "not to where the report is suggesting," he said.

High-density developments support "the little coffee shops and bakeries . . . and you also need parking because as the city is growing, you want to have places for (people) to park because as soon as people have a perception there's nowhere to park, they don't visit those neighbourhoods.

"If you put too many restrictions then developers will go somewhere else and the area won't regenerate, or else it will become stagnant and die," Miller said.

Harriet Richards, a member of Broadway Initiative for Livable Development, a grassroots group of area residents, said her main concern is tall buildings will overpower the streetscape and be inconsistent with the character of the neighbourhood.

The recommended height restrictions, which she'd like to see reduced to seven storeys, and the idea of making Broadway an architectural control district, though, are a step in the right direction, she said.

"I think that there is some resistance on the part of developers who don't want to have any restrictions based on their potential earnings and I have no sympathy for that," Richards said.

The next step will involve prioritizing which elements of the plan should be implemented first, said Gale Hagblom, executive director of the Broadway Business Improvement District.

"Not all of these can be achieved at one swoop," Hagblom said. "We have to look at what people want to see done first because each of them are of value."

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RETHINKING BROADWAY AVENUE

- Bring life to back lanes: Alleyways along Broadway should be used for patios, cafes and stores with "distinctive paving" and light fixtures to attract pedestrians and improve safety.
- Create a public plaza: Five Corners at the intersection of Broadway Avenue and 12th Street should be transformed into a paved public plaza.
- Restrict heights: A nine-storey or 30-metre limit on the height of new buildings is recommended.
- Relocate community gardens: Move community garden from a vacant lot to a permanent location on the west end of 12th Street.
- Better manage parking: The parking supply on Broadway is adequate but many areas are underutilized with a need for more marked stalls and better use of back lanes.
- Integrate Oskayak High School: The report calls for enhancements to the school to create a building and grounds that is more integrated into the street.

To see the full report go to www.broadway360.ca.

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