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Hundreds help map out development strategy for the town

workshops on redevelopment bring out people and ideas

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From the halcyon days of 1850s Goderich when a group of citizens petitioned council for changes that would keep cattle off the central park lawns, to the design of a comprehensive master plan for the area more than 150 years later, public sentiment hasn't changed much.

Courthouse Park in the centre of the downtown Square remains the jewel of the town and the source of pride to its residents. It's development as a people and pedestrian-friendly facility to compliment one of the most unique retail shopping areas in North America, remains a priority for the town as it moves forward with redevelopment plans in the aftermath of the Aug. 21 tornado.

Hundreds of people literally offered thousands of ideas over three-days of workshops conducted by the town through Planning Partnership Consultants who guided groups and individuals through the process of defining visions, principles and a building framework for redevelopment that would lead to solid plans for the future.

The three days of consultative workshops held at the Legion were designed to guide municipal groups and residents through a process that would solicit ideas and help create a clear vision for the possibilities for the downtown and park area.

And based on the participation and input, the possibilities are unique, visionary and captivating in creating space that will serve the municipality for generations.

At a wrap up session Saturday, consultants presented various concepts and designs for uses of the park and downtown area that include: the development of unique gateways from the perimeter to the centre of town; elimination of vehicular traffic from the park to create a more pedestrian friendly area; narrowing the roadway from the park to the buildings to create more of a promenade effect; moving event-based activities to hardscape promenade areas on The Square which could be closed to traffic; developing a skating rink in the park; moving the Farmers' Market to a more permanent structure by The Livery on South Street; retain the Cenotaph and important commemorative aspects of the park and create a sidewalk around the perimeter of the park and include pedestrian safe crosswalks at every corner.

"Courthouse Park is the green emerald jewel and focus of downtown for all of Goderich," consultant Harold Madi told the group. "It is the oasis in the middle of the centrally-located public square. It is the living room of Goderich and is full of the heritage and history of the buildings on The Square."

Maintaining the park as an inviting greenspace is "an important amenity" to the people of the town Madi said, adding that the roadway and sidewalks should be considered an extension of the park area.

"It should feel like a quality, inviting place and you can make it the best people-friendly square in North America," he said.

Courthouse Park

Based on community input, Courthouse Park would continue to be a venue for community events but would also feature more passive areas for sitting and enjoying the area that could be developed with gardens and other inviting landscaping.

The use of the courthouse building could be altered so that Police and legal authorities would use the northern

entrance leaving the South Street entrance available for development as a performance area and showpiece for the park. The consultants suggested an enhanced porch or stage-like area could be created there.

Consultants recommended moving the bandstand to an area West of the courthouse building and allowing room for the creation of a skating rink in the park in winter, possibly on the paved portion of South Street.

The Farmers' Market could continue to operate on a wider paved portion of the South Street entrance or move to town owned land adjacent to the Livery where it would feature a permanent structure. The area could easily support the construction of a cultural arts centre.

Walkways

With a sidewalk around the perimeter of the park, the Flea Market and other events could take place on the outside area of the park.

The sidewalk or promenade in front of the retail outlets, should be expanded and include the angle parking section, so the parking and pedestrian area would be one level. There would be tree plantings along this area and the parking could be closed off to have booths or special events along the promenade.

Tree cover

Naturally, the most prominent design element requested in the near and long-term redevelopment plan is the replanting of thousands of trees to create the shady and inviting canopy not only in Courthouse Park, but along the town's residential streets and lakebank.

Arborist Michael Ormston-Holloway, said that while the desire to have a large tree canopy in Courthouse Park is top of mind, he cautioned that the plantings, location and types of trees would drive the design of the park. He added that larger trees require more room for roots adding that vehicular traffic should not be allowed on the lawn area.

Of immediate concern, he said, is the establishment of the lakebank and bluffs along the northern and westerly areas of town.

"It is clear that the slopes along the banks need to be stabilized," he said. "We need to plant trees with large root systems that will take hold and secure the banks. In town we need to plant a balance of trees, some that are quick growing will create a canopy in five years and those hardwoods that will take longer to grow but be around for 200 years."

He estimates that about 5,000 trees will be planted over time.

Buildings-Streetscapes

The rebuilding of The Square will obviously be an integration of the old and the new with design consultants looking to establish a "horizontal rhythm" around The Square. And in the process of allowing redevelopment, the town has to foster an environment for change that promotes rebuilding and reinvestment in the core.

"You are also putting together a long-term plan and trying to create a vision for 20 years and beyond," Dan Leeming said. "The master plan will guide investment over 20 years and include planning policy. You have to reduce the risks and cost of redevelopment for people through zoning bylaws and the official plan.

"In the long term, the town has to establish an environment for change, encourage re-development and reviews its approval process. You have to promote rebuilding and reinvestment," he said.

Consultant Rick Merrill said that residential development in the downtown area is hampered by the ability to park cars. He said the lanes behind buildings on The Square could be utilized to provide rear parking for apartments and residences above the retail section.

The consultants had several recommendations on enhancing the gateways to the central of town that included proper signage to bring people off Highways 21 and 8 to the core.

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