

Discover Downtown committee to present its recommendations to revitalize downtown Cambridge

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Discover Downtown, the committee formed to work on revitalizing downtown Cambridge, has been hard at work for six months, and members will present their recommendations to the public at 7 p.m. March 22 in the Richard G. Hardy Performing Arts Center at Cambridge-Isanti High School.

Todd Streeter of Community Collaboration has been facilitating the project with Discover Downtown. Streeter was a part of the Minnesota Design Team's visit to Cambridge in the spring of 2016, and he worked on similar revitalization efforts for downtown Stillwater. Streeter said every downtown is different and that the focus in Stillwater was on making the town into a "12-month district" rather than a seasonal destination.

The goal of this revitalization effort is to return lost traffic to downtown Cambridge.

"It used to be that historical downtowns were the epicenter of the community," Streeter said. "Obviously a lot's changed."

Those changes that have impacted the resilience of downtown Cambridge and many other downtowns include the internet, big box retail stores and commercial development.

"They've all put a squeeze on older downtowns," Streeter said.

Revitalizing a historical downtown like Cambridge requires a change in perceptions about downtowns so that they can fulfill the desires people have now while remaining true to their histories and identities.

"Downtowns can't function in the future as they have in the past," Streeter said. "If we accept that to be true, then we have to accept that downtowns have to serve a different purpose."

The Discover Downtown committee's efforts to improve downtown are focused toward three major areas: the physical condition of downtown, the ambiance of downtown and the business mix in downtown. Per Streeter, the most important of these goals is attracting the right mix of new and longstanding businesses to Cambridge. That is also the major goal the committee is able to exert the least control over.

Some examples of desirable downtown businesses the group came up with include brewpubs, specialty retail businesses and restaurants with outdoor dining during the warm months. Ideas to improve the aesthetic experience of downtown include banners, benches and keeping the sidewalks cleaner. Improving the physical condition of downtown will require encouraging owners of downtown property to keep their buildings in good condition and filling empty

buildings in the downtown area. All three aspects are related: Improving the aesthetic qualities of downtown will theoretically help attract businesses, and attracting businesses is a component key to fill empty spaces in the neighborhood.

The committee's presentation on March 22 will consist of short segments by each of six subcommittees Discover Downtown has formed. Between the subcommittees, over 50 ideas, opportunities and suggestions they have to accomplish these goals for the future of downtown Cambridge will be revealed.

The ideas to be presented run the gamut from free to low cost to more expensive efforts that would require further study and help from the city government to accomplish. Streeter stressed that the revitalization project has never been a taxpayer proposition. The ideas Discover Downtown will present are intended as projects, many of which could be sponsored and executed by local businesses and organizations.

One major initiative Discover Downtown is planning is the creation of a Cambridge Area Community Foundation to continue its work and fund its proposed projects. The committee also hopes to turn potential changes to highway 95, possible construction of an underpass and the potential expansion of the light rail system into opportunities to benefit Cambridge's downtown.

"When a lot of people pitch in a little ... all things are possible," Streeter said.