

Team working to finish downtown-Perkins St. design

By KATIE MINTZ

Ukiah Daily Journal

Article Last Updated: 04/11/2007 08:35:40 AM PDT

Two weeks ago, not many in Ukiah had heard the terms "form-based zoning," defined as zoning for development by form rather than use, or "charrette," defined as an intensive series of workshops, but Fisher & Hall Urban Design Inc. changed that.

The Santa Rosa-based firm, hired by the city of Ukiah, was in town to gather input for Ukiah's own SmartCode -- another word for form-based zoning -- for the downtown and Perkins Street corridor and in the charrette process, met with a legion of the community, including elected officials, boards, commissions, committees, city staff, emergency personnel, merchants, property owners, builders, architects, developers, Nuestra Casa staff, seniors and youth.

"It's wonderful working for a small town, but especially a small town like this where everybody cares so much," Project Director Laura Hall said Saturday evening at the closing session in the Ukiah Valley Conference Center.

Hall said she and business partner Lois Fisher will finalize the documents in the next month and return them to the city. Once in the city's hands, Senior Planner Pamela Townsend said staff will do an internal review. By June, Townsend said, the SmartCode will hopefully be presented to the public followed by Planning Commission hearings in August before the code goes before the City Council for adoption.

City Director of Planning and Community Development Charley Stump likened the weeklong effort, which began last Monday with an exercise to define the direction of the design, to raising a child.

"We sort of had a baby on Monday, and the baby grew up during the week and is now a young, responsible adult and you're the parents," Stump told the approximately 100-strong audience Saturday at the closing presentation.

What began at the beginning of last week as visions of maintaining Ukiah's charm -- many participants said they'd like to see old buildings, such as the Palace Hotel and train depot, preserved and downtown's small, walkable block structure emulated east of State Street along the Perkins Street corridor -- progressed to a distinct plan in its course.

On Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings, ideas were refined at informal meetings with input received incorporated the next day in what Hall called "24-hour feedback loops" - a key to the charrette process.

"We hold design principles very high here, but we held that one right there with it," Hall said of the comforting feeling many said they have as they crest Burke Hill on a drive home, continuing, "so, whatever we did, you would still be able to say Ahh, I'm home. It's unique, it's this place I love and I still recognize it and it just keeps getting more wonderful, more connected."

The closing presentation and celebration Saturday, complete with a cake showing one conceptualization, also included a wrap-up from Hall highlighting six major concepts that came out of the process.

The first, making Perkins Street more walkable, could be achieved by widening the street to allow on-street parking, as well as bringing business fronts closer to the street, Hall said. In the same area, a "gateway building" was proposed for the corner of East Perkins Street and Orchard Avenue at the Pear Tree Center that incorporates design elements from Ukiah, like the turret on the Ukiah Brewing Co. building.

"(The gateway is) not a roundabout, which is always controversial. It's not arches like Willits, which is always controversial. It's actually this beautiful building...and when you drive in you see that in front of a civic square," Hall said.

Another concept of note was bringing more attention to Gibson Creek throughout town, namely, creating a gateway to downtown where the creek crosses North State Street by narrowing the road and adding markers. Also downtown was the concept of creating more civic space by reducing the size of the courthouse to accommodate a library should the courts be moved.

If it is moved (a current topic of the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors as it looks to create a comprehensive criminal justice facility), one major concept suggested the courthouse relocate near the train depot at East Perkins Street and Mason Street. Other elements of the facility, such as the jail, could be surrounded by more attractive liner buildings, Hall said.

Finally, Hall discussed a need for an "anchor store" -- large stores that can be, but don't have to be, local -- in Ukiah's downtown, citing figures that show 95 percent of dry goods were purchased in traditional downtowns in 1950, and now, only 2 percent are.

"Is it any wonder our downtowns are struggling? Our daily needs aren't downtown anymore," Hall said. "If you have something downtown where people will need to go everyday...it doesn't hurt the cute little merchants, they are helped by it."

The code that will come out of the process will not require these specific concepts, but will designate the entire plan area as mixed-use and define design principles, such as the building's placement on the lot, its height, frontage type and where to put the parking, that will be conducive to the concepts.

If adopted, existing properties in the plan area will not be required to conform to the principles, but city officials are hopeful that the code will stimulate new development, which could have a snowballing effect.

Katie Mintz can be reached at udjkm@pacific.net.