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CRA at work on downtown planning
Many projects hinge on codes being in place

By JEFF CULL, jcull@news-press.com

One year ago, a group of like-minded business people embarked on an ambitious project: to remold Cape Coral's downtown into a true urban area.

The old ways — 1960s single-story buildings, parking lots in front of shops, and a six-lane parkway rolling through town — weren't working.

People, they figured, yearned for something more than shopping ventures that required endless trips in the car or a visit to a mega-mall with all the sterile ambience of, well, a mega-mall.

The group's vision was to create a walking district with all the shops and dining and entertainment that Cape residents and visitors would want — a sort of Third Street South in Naples meets the middle class.

So, the downtown Community Redevelopment Agency decided to get some help.

It hired one of the country's top downtown planning firms — Dover, Kohl & Partners from south Miami. Dover, Kohl brought with it traffic engineers, economists, artists,

DOWNTOWN LUNCH: Rod Broadstone, left, has a root beer while eating lunch with Anthony Krolczyk at Pete's Philly Steak. The Cape Coral Community Redevelopment Agency hopes to create a downtown environment more conducive to outdoor dining. *STEPHEN HAYFORD/The News-Press*

Click on image to enlarge.

designers and planners. They scoured the city collecting data and interviewing business owners.

By September of last year they were ready to start talking to residents.

Meetings were held and the public went to work at an all-day planning session. They divided into groups and started designing a new downtown for Cape Coral. It was the Cape's version of the popular city-design computer game SimCity, but with felt-tipped pens.

The public's designs were as mundane as putting a few roundabouts on Cape Coral Parkway to ease traffic speed or as innovative as digging canals in the downtown to further the city's waterfront image.

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Dover, Kohl sifted through all the proposals and added its expert touch to come up with a master plan that called for Mediterranean-style buildings, new streets to shorten walking distance and a radical re-design of Cape Coral Parkway into a Parisian boulevard.

Residents hailed the plan as creative, ambitious and just what the downtown needed. The City Council gave it a unanimous blessing.

But not all the ideas flew.

The Parisian boulevard was shelved for the meantime as too costly and too decisive a political issue.

Now the CRA is in the process of creating the codes and regulations that will govern building in the 340-acre downtown area, which will become a zoning district of its own.

The rules are intended to make developing in the downtown less restrictive and less bureaucratic. It places much of the burden for approving plans on the city's Community Development Department, including some authority that was previously held by the city's zoning board. It takes out a layer of bureaucracy, said CRA executive director Chet Hunt, and makes the permit process quicker.

"For that benefit all we're asking developers is to give us a great project," he said.

How the CRA works

Community redevelopment agencies are usually formed to fix up areas within a city that have suffered blight or decline and "constitute a serious and growing menace, injurious to the public health, safety, morals and welfare of the residents of the state," according to the Florida Community Redevelopment Act of 1969. That law also allows counties or cities to fund a CRA through property taxes that are generated above a certain level.

NEW LOOK: The Cape Coral Community Redevelopment Agency has decided on final plans for redesigning the downtown area along Cape Coral Parkway. *STEPHEN HAYFORD/The News-Press*

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The Cape Coral CRA started with a number of $71 million. The number, established in 1987 when the CRA was born, was the property value of the downtown area. The higher the property value downtown, the more money the agency receives. Today, the city's downtown is valued at $106 million and will generate $581,000.

The agency uses that money for a variety of downtown projects, such as the landscaping, pavers and decorative lighting on Cape Coral Parkway, hiring consultants to formulate the downtown master plan and fund an incentive program that pays downtown business owners to improve their properties.

The CRA board is not elected but appointed. They all serve as volunteers and receive no payment for their work. Its executive director is a paid city employee who answers directly to the agency's board.

Expanding the boundary

One of the most contentious issues the CRA has tackled this year is an attempt to expand its boundaries to include more land on its eastern (Southeast 17th Place) and western (Palm Tree Boulevard) limits.

Hunt said the agency needs those areas because they represent the gateways to the downtown and have the potential to fill CRA coffers with tax money.

Opponents, and they come from both ends of the expansion area, say they're comfortable with the city controlling the zoning and building of their property and they fear the "police" powers of eminent domain the CRA could wield.

"We'd be dealing with an appointed body, not an elected body," said Joanne McKoy, who lives within the western expansion zone. "Let's keep our rights with the elected officials."

Cape Coral Holdings Inc., a downtown landowner, is also objecting to being included in the CRA expansion. Laura Holquist, president of the firm, said she'd rather wait until the city approves the new building and zoning codes before she agrees to allow a 4-acre site near the Cape Coral Bridge to be included in the downtown district.

The CRA, however, doesn't want to wait, so a battle may be looming.

Positive effects

The CRA's work is already producing a concrete change to the downtown. Developers are interested in the lessened bureaucracy that the new codes will provide but the real key is providing services for the Cape's booming population, most of it in the southern half of the city.

Some of those projects include:

● Local entrepreneur Russ Whitney's proposal to convert the Avalon Engineering building on Cape Coral Parkway into a town square with shopping, restaurants, offices and a convention center.

● The Chamber of Commerce of Cape Coral is working with developer Will Stout to build a 14,000-square-foot welcome center near its current location on Cape Coral Parkway.

● A Naples developer is looking to build a mixed-use, residential and commercial development in the CRA district.

And there are many others that didn't want to tip their hand in the newspapers.

"There are plenty out there," Hunt said. "We have some speculating. I'd like to get them going but the climate's not right yet."

Once the downtown building codes go into effect, in about three to six months, Hunt said, more projects will come to light.

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