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Downtown vision coming to life Businesses reach for Mediterranean look

By JEFF CULL, jcull@news-press.com

When Russ Whitney was deciding how to renovate his downtown Cape Coral corporate headquarters only one theme came to mind.

"I wanted it to look like the downtown master plan," said Whitney, president of Whitney Education Group Inc. "I wanted to give people a view of what the plan would look like."

Whitney, like a number of other real estate developers, thinks Cape Coral's downtown is hot property. Some have already made big investments while others are testing the waters.

"I see tremendous potential in the downtown area," said real estate consultant Roger Pedersen.

Jerry Furio, the owner of Paesano's Deli and Butcher Shop, has already stepped to the plate.

He's also made changes to the 16,000 square foot building that will house his popular deli to make it more compatible with the downtown plan.

Even though his building has a Mediterranean theme, like the planners' vision, he's adding more windows on the streetside and an outdoor dining lanai to his Lafayette Street building.

"I'm trying to be the spark to attract more building to the downtown," Furio said.

And that's just what CRA officials want.

"The developers have been very receptive to making changes," said Chet Hunt, executive director of the CRA. "They want to make this plan work."

The city council approved the Community Redevelopment Agency's downtown master plan in February after a five-month planning period.

Dover, Kohl & Planners, the agency's planners, met with residents, held town hall meetings and designed a new downtown.



CREATING NEW CHARACTER: Paesano's Deli on Lafayette Street in Cape Coral is being renovated to conform with new master plan. (MARC BEAUDIN/The News-Press)

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That design provides more access to the waterfront, pedestrian-friendly streets, parks and squares, and a Mediterranean architectural theme that will foster a mix of commercial and residential buildings in the 340-acre downtown.

It also fits nicely into Chris Canzano's plan for his new 12,000-square foot office building on Cape Coral Parkway.

"Seeing what I've seen in Naples, I decided I wanted that upscale theme," said Canzano, owner of Villa Realty Group Inc.

He added that construction on the Mediterranean-style, two-story building should begin in about two months. He also said he's looking for more property to develop in the downtown.



THE CITY'S NEW LOOK? The Whitney building on Coronado Parkway in Cape Coral. (MARC BEAUDIN/The News-Press)

"In 10 years you won't be able to recognize downtown Cape Coral," he said. "It's very exciting."

Whitney also has big ideas for downtown.

He plans to convert the Avalon Engineering building at the corner of Cape Coral Parkway and Waikiki Avenue into a town square with shopping, restaurants, offices, and a convention center. Whitney, who owns the building, said it could be started in as little as 18 months.

Click on image to enlarge.

"Our goal is a Naples-style promenade," he said. "It could be a \$100 million facility."

Whitney's also looking to add to his land portfolio downtown. He said he has a contract to purchase the AccuData America building on Cape Coral Parkway. AccuData announced this week it was moving to Fort Myers.

But Whitney said his motives are not all financial gain. As a 20-year resident, he said he wants what's best for the city.

"I have a great deal of loyalty to this town," he said.

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