



The Herald-Palladium

https://www.heraldpalladium.com/news/local/downtown-harbor-studies-on-tap-for-st-joseph/article_9ed25767-428d-525b-8457-d49b13e3cb03.html

TOP STORY

Downtown, harbor studies on tap for St. Joseph

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer Sep 11, 2018 Updated 4 hrs ago



A knight sculpture stands guard in downtown St. Joseph, which is the subject of a revised master plan to be drafted over the year. On Monday, city commissioners selected the Chicago firm Houseal Lavigne, which is headed by St. Joseph native Joh Houseal, to oversee the planning process.

John Matuszak / HP Staff

ST. JOSEPH — St. Joseph residents can get ready to dive into creating a new downtown master plan, and also to provide input into development of the waterfront.

On Monday, city commissioners approved hiring Houseal Lavigne Associates, of Chicago, to head the drafting of a development plan for the central district.

The director of the firm is St. Joseph native John Houseal, a graduate of Lake Michigan Catholic High School who still has family in the community.

At Monday's meeting, Houseal said that, after 25 years in the field and more than 300 projects, he has never been happier to be tapped for a study.

The company was chosen by a downtown steering committee and city staff from 13 that provided proposals. It was among five selected for interviews, and three finalists that were provided with follow-up questions.

Commissioner Lynn Todman, who participated in the selection process, said it was a tough decision. She said she was swayed by Houseal's passion for St. Joseph, and his open-mindedness in seeing that some things can be improved.

The cost to the consultants is \$102,100. The project was initially budgeted at \$75,000, but committee members decided they also wanted the company to conduct a parking and traffic study.

Houseal Lavigne will work with Sam Schwartz Engineers, which will take on the parking/traffic study, and Johnson Consulting, which will focus on ideas for entertainment venues for residents.

Houseal has conducted master plan projects for Benton Harbor, Niles and many other Michigan cities, along with communities in 28 states.

Areas of focus of the master plan include mobility; commercial uses; entertainment; aesthetics/streetscape; and mixed use development.

According to the city's request for proposal, the mobility aspect will include "improved traffic planning combined with more efficient downtown parking; increased fee-based parking opportunities; and investigation of offsite parking opportunities with shuttle service to the downtown area."

The company recently completed a parking study for New Buffalo that resulted in reconfigured on-street parking, sidewalks that more than doubled in width, and a new streetscape and pedestrian mobility plan.

The goal for commercial uses will be to "increase the quality, quantity and variety of retail, dining and entertainment options for the year round user while providing a better understanding of the personal and professional services, office space and housing types found in the study area."

For entertainment, the plan proposes to present “opportunities to increase the quantity and variety of year round and midweek programs geared toward residents with the possible creation of a new venue or outdoor gathering place located above the Bluff.”

A key goal for the plan will be striking a balance between the needs of residents, visitors and property and business owners.

Discussions are expected to start in October with meetings with the Downtown Planning Steering Committee and with members of city boards and commissions.

Public engagement will include a downtown workshop, and another event geared toward business and property owners, both to be held in November.

The company proposes several other ways to gather public input, such as an interactive website and map.social, a community outreach online platform where residents can offer ideas; web-based questionnaires; and an option “vision board,” a chalk board where participants can leave suggestions.

A public open house and hearing on the draft document will be held by the Planning Commission next fall, with the final report going to city commissioners by December 2019.

Harbor study

Commissioners also heard a proposal from the Twin Cities Sustainable Harbor Project to hold meetings to discuss development along the area’s waterfront.

The recommendations include a one-day open session Sept. 19, and a three-day “charrette” for community members to offer ideas for improvements, to be held Oct. 9-11, all starting at 6 p.m. All gatherings will take place at Kinexus, 499 W. Main St., Benton Harbor.

Don Carpenter, project manager, said it will be “a grassroots effort to come up with a shared vision” for the harbor.

The group has worked with several lakeside communities to assist in enhancing their harbors, including Rogers City, Pentwater and New Baltimore. The organization includes representatives from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources Office of the Great Lakes; the Twin City Harbor Conservancy; Michigan State University Extension; and Michigan Sea Grant.

Focus groups to be involved are the Edgewater Neighborhood Association, Benton Harbor Arts District and Island Point and Eagle Point condominium associations; commercial enterprises including Central Dock, Pier 33, Harbor Shores, the St. Joseph River Yacht Club and Whirlpool Corp.; and environmental organizations Two Rivers Coalition, the Nature Conservancy, and the Berrien County Conservation District.

Contact: jmatuszak@TheHP.com, 932-0360, Twitter: @HPMatuszak