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TOP STORY

Twin Cities residents envision vibrant waterfront

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer Oct 12, 2018

BENTON HARBOR — Those who attended the last of the three meetings this week on the Twin Cities Harbor plan got to take a leap more than 20 years into the future.

And what did they see in Twin Cities Harbor 2040?

There's a public marina next to the LaFarge docks along the St. Joseph River's outer harbor.

There's a multi-level building on the current site of the Berrien County Courthouse parking lot, with retail space, parking, a green roof plaza, and an elevator down to parks along the waterfront.

New dwellings, shops, a school and a marina line Riverview Drive in Benton Harbor, laced with trails and a harbor walk.

On Marina Island, a Fisherman's Wharf District has risen, along with condominiums and townhouses, a technical trade school and a pedestrian bridge connected to the mainland.

All of this and more arose out of the imaginations of residents, who on Wednesday voted on their preferences at a meeting at Kinexus.

None of it is set in concrete, planners emphasized.

"This is a concept, an idea, a vision. It's not a ratified master plan. It is not in its final form," explained Don Carpenter, a consultant who has helped shepherd the discussion on the development of the 730-acre waterfront in St. Joseph, Benton Harbor and St. Joseph Township.

After a Tuesday session to gather public input, and an open house Wednesday where participants offered thumbs up or down on suggestions, designers scrambled to incorporate all the elements of the preferred version.

“This is our interpretation of what we’ve heard the last three days,” Carpenter said. “It’s a work in progress.”

Some of the land on the map is in private hands, and the owners might not even want to climb on board, Carpenter added. “The market will drive what gets built, not us.”

Some ideas sank. Suggestions for high-rise condos and a private marina near the LaFarge site were jettisoned.

One concept considered actually moving Riverview Drive and creating a new marina area, but residents decided this was a bridge too far, Carpenter said.

But plans do envision a transformed neighborhood with a new street bisecting the area. Housing for seniors and entry-level homebuyers, such as young professionals, is included. A sports center, events space and an African-American Cultural Center are part of the mix.

The design leaves room for sidewalks and bike trails that connect to the rest of the Benton Harbor community.

Carpenter said the idea for a skilled trades school on Marina Island came from business owners who noted the lack of potential employees trained in such professions as boat-building. Wetlands on the island are preserved.

A Market Shed is pinpointed for land at the confluence of the Paw Paw River. That includes a farmers market and local crafts shops on the ground floor, along with upper-level space for entrepreneurs.

The elevator from the courthouse platform leads to park space for entertainment events and food vendors.

The amenities are connected with a public trolley, water taxis and bike trails with bike-sharing stations.

One participant questioned whether boating would still be popular in 20 years, and if a lot of marina slips should be built.

Carpenter said that the plan does not include adding a lot of slips, but does increase the number of transient slots for day-trippers who might want to patronize restaurants and other businesses. Right now, of the 1,600 slips in the harbor area, only 10 are set aside for transient boaters.

Along with the public meetings, input was gathered through focus groups and social media. Planners also took driving, walking and boat tours of the area.

Carpenter said more focus groups are expected, including with young professionals and religious groups. More discussions with municipal leaders also are in the offing. Carpenter did not yet know when a “final” final plan would be presented.

John Egelhaaf, executive director of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, noted that these latest plans grew out of a study done by Andrews University in 2015. The desire to keep the conversation going led to the creation of the Harbor Conservancy, a partner in the current effort.

Egelhaaf called this stage “Plan 2,” and said that a formal plan is just ahead.

He said he hopes local communities would do their own planning and coordinate together.

What eventually happens is up to those communities, he said. “It’s all on them.”

The final presentation will be available at:

www.miseagrant.umich.edu/smallharborsustainability/communities/st-joseph-benton-harbor/.

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