

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

August 2, 2015

Coeur d'Alene planning redevelopment of Sherman Avenue

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The Spokesman-Review

Tags: bike lanes CDA 2030 Coeur d'Alene East

Sherman Avenue homelessness public art Steve Adams Steve Widmyer turn lanes urban renewal



"I'm homeless right now," Kenneth "Pops" Frank said Wednesday as he played guitar at St. Vincent de Paul's Fresh Start drop-in center on East Sherman Avenue in Coeur d'Alene. The city is leading a discussion on how to revitalize the corridor, which includes bars, restaurants, transitional housing and a mix of retail shops.

Depending on who you ask, the east gateway to Coeur d'Alene is either a thriving business district or an urban blemish. An up-and-coming working neighborhood with grit, or drab and neglected – ripe for revitalization.

Reality resides somewhere between these extremes. East Sherman Avenue is neither dilapidated nor as vibrant as other parts of town. But it's now at the center of a city-led discussion on what could be done to improve the 12-block corridor from downtown east to Interstate 90.

"I would love to see it grow and get better, and have a place for small business," said Mayor Steve Widmyer, who is keen on breathing new life into East Sherman.

The street is a time capsule, preserving remnants of old Coeur d'Alene before the interstate and resort tower, and before so much of downtown flipped to trendy shops, restaurants and art galleries.

Motor-inn motels built when Sherman was part of the main highway across the Panhandle are now low-income rentals and transitional housing. Most of the small homes on the street have been converted to professional offices and shops. The rest is a mix of bars and retailers: a tattoo parlor, a liquor store, an obsolete service station, the popular Moon Time restaurant, and an institution – Roger's Ice Cream & Burgers.

Walking the length of East Sherman, Widmyer points out pockets of blight he'd like to see redeveloped. He figures a few buildings are "bulldozer worthy," ready for new commercial

investment. That, along with heavier police patrols and beautification efforts, could set off a revival of the corridor, much as has happened in the city's Midtown district over the past decade, he said.

But he also concedes that East Sherman has improved organically, absent an organized community effort.

"It's getting gradually nicer," the mayor said.

Finding a vision

The city is preparing to write a master plan for the redevelopment of East Sherman Avenue as a piece of a larger community planning effort called the CDA 2030 Visioning Project.

"East Sherman really rose to the top," said Hilary Anderson, the city's community planning director. "The greater Coeur d'Alene community said we really want to do something with this part of Sherman Avenue because it is the city's eastern gateway and it has so much potential."

This summer, the public has been invited to share ideas on what would make the corridor more inviting. From two town hall meetings in June, an "easy wins" voting booth last month and 270 submitted surveys, residents have said they favor a mixed-use district with a possible emphasis on entrepreneurs showcasing locally made food and wares.

In feedback, many people said they like that "this is the working end of Sherman and then downtown is more the tourist and shopping end," Anderson said.

Most participants saw a need for sidewalk and crosswalk improvements, protected bike lanes, trees and landscaping, façade upgrades, signs identifying the district, and better transient and crime management. They also favored redeveloping or repurposing vacant buildings and providing economic incentives for that to happen. Residents also showed strong support for an open-air market featuring local food, a pocket park and a playground.

Next, the city will conduct interviews and focus groups with those who live, work and own property along Sherman Avenue, then convene an advisory committee to help move toward a plan next year.

“We don’t have to go in and do a full-blown, detailed master plan on everything that’s going to happen,” Anderson said. “I think at a minimum we need to help with the visioning for the corridor, to get everyone to come together – the business owners, property owners, the residents – to say, what do we want this corridor to look like? If you don’t have a vision, then it could just end up as hodgepodge or it could take a lot longer for something to occur.”

Street appeal

Steve Adams grew up near Tubbs Hill and has run his business, Avalanche Insurance Agency, in a former house at Sherman and 13th Street since 1994.

“Over my lifetime, 49 years, it hasn’t changed a lot,” he said of the neighborhood.

A city councilman and fiscal conservative, Adams sees no need for major public investment in the corridor.

“I think organically it’s taking care of itself,” he said. “It’s fine just the way it is.”

Some of the ideas on the drawing board include slowing down traffic and maybe removing the center turn lane to make room for landscaping or bike lanes. The city rebuilt the street and sidewalks less than 20 years ago, Adams said, and the cost of doing it again concerns him. He also questions if the changes would boost property values.

“Something like that would be a multimillion dollar project,” he said. “It’s certainly not something that I want to have to help foot the bill for.”

Greg Paradox owns a music equipment and remote-control hobby shop on East Sherman, and he said the business climate is as good as he has seen it in 16 years there. Paradox is open to some modest changes to spruce up the corridor, but nothing like the Midtown makeover, which included sidewalk bump-outs to slow traffic at crosswalks and the installation of public artwork.

“I’d like to see it revitalized a little bit. But we don’t need metal sculptures on every corner,” he said.

Since the recession ended, more businesses have moved to East Sherman. A prominent one is Vertical Earth, a bike shop that relocated from the Riverstone development about

two years ago. Owner Mike Gaertner said the sketchy reputation of East Sherman was a concern, but the move has worked out well.

“A big part of our motivation for taking the risk on the area was the potential for improvement, which has been talked about in the city for many years and now actually seems to be making some headway,” Gaertner said.

He’s drawn to making Sherman a greener street, possibly with landscaped islands down the center, like the city did on Northwest Boulevard.

Making East Sherman more inviting to bicyclists is another idea that has appealed to people engaged in the city’s discussions. The Centennial Trail can be found four blocks to the south, along East Mullan Avenue. But if East Sherman had its own bike lanes, more residents would be comfortable taking that route and patronizing businesses on the street, Widmyer said.

“Do we need turning lanes here?” he said. “Can we take out the turning lane and put bike lanes here to make this a more bikeable area?”

A longtime real estate investor, the mayor owns a couple of commercial buildings on East Sherman. He said he’s not looking for any business advantages from the revitalization effort. Widmyer said he is more concerned with seeing the broader corridor rise to its full potential, like Spokane’s Perry District on the lower South Hill.

One way to achieve that, he said, is to form a local improvement district, in which the businesses along the street finance public projects, such as street improvements and landscaping.

“It’s going to take a little bit of recruiting,” Widmyer said. “We need to get together with our commercial realtors and begin selling this area and selling the advantage.”

But Adams said he isn’t so sure there’s support for that. He has spoken with many other businesses along East Sherman, and few are in favor of a creating a local improvement district to raise money for major street changes, he said.

“Predominantly, the great majority weren’t interested in any type of LID or tax increase of any sort,” Adams said.

Greater police presence

The Coeur d'Alene Police Department routinely generates maps showing high crime areas in bright red. East Sherman has been red-hot for years, with alcohol and drug offenses, petty theft and burglary, assaults and other crimes of opportunity.

"We do have quite a problem with the homeless in that area," police Chief Lee White said. "We are continually battling, I hate to say, quality-of-life issues ... where we're having homeless individuals use the outdoors as a restroom. We do frequently get complaints and calls about that."

The city opened a police substation at Sherman and 14th Street in September. It's not staffed regularly, but officers pop in to write reports, return calls and take lunch breaks. The increased police presence, along with a shift in focus to building stronger community relationships, is helping, White said. He's hearing it from residents and businesspeople.

"The perception of crime, or the lack of crime, I think is more important than any statistic I can float in front of you," he said. "A lot of that has to do with the fact that they know our cops are paying attention down there."

Paradox said he has seen a drop in loitering on the sidewalks near his hobby shop since the substation opened.

That's important, he added, because East Sherman's reputation is worse than reality.

"I know people who are afraid to come down here because they've heard all these things," Paradox said.

Wayne Harmon moved from northwestern Montana and in April opened an organic nursery outlet in a former auto repair shop at Sherman and 15th Street, across the street from the police substation. He said he had no hesitation in starting the seasonal business there and has had no serious problems.

"It's a good neighborhood," Harmon said as he busily watered his geraniums, marigolds and petunias on a recent hot afternoon. East Sherman feels vibrant and safe to him, and neighbors even help look out for his property when he's away.

"It's slowly coming to life," Harmon said. "I'll be here next year, oh yeah."

A lot of complaints about crime and safety zero in on one place, Fresh Start, a nonprofit drop-in center for the homeless at Sherman and 16th Street. People can get a bite to eat, shower, wash clothes and pick up mail there.

But neighbors believe Fresh Start has attracted a lot of chronically homeless who have contributed to crime along East Sherman. The Postal Service even stopped leaving packages on doorsteps in the area because of a rash of mail thefts.

Last year, Fresh Start merged with St. Vincent de Paul North Idaho, which operates transitional housing, mostly for veterans, in two former motels on East Sherman.

“In the year and a half since we’ve taken it over, a lot of those issues have died down,” said Jeff Conroy, the agency’s executive director. “We implemented rules and we have a lot less tolerance of bad behavior,” such as drunkenness and disrespectful conduct. “I have a responsibility to protect that neighborhood.”

Fresh Start’s lease is up in October, and it will move to the St. Vincent de Paul campus on East Harrison Avenue, in the Midtown neighborhood. There, patrons will have direct access to all the agency’s services, Conroy said.

From community feedback, affordable housing development and homeless housing and shelter options along East Sherman have fairly low support. But Jennifer Bokma, who used to live nearby and now lives on the city’s north side, flagged those services as a priority in an online survey the city sponsored.

Coeur d’Alene “is in dire need of homeless housing, transitional housing” that’s up to a standard acceptable to nearby residents, Bokma said. “I would like to see something nicer down there and the money be funneled that way, but I think it’s going to be funneled maybe into trees and sidewalks and public art.”

East Sherman, she added, does not shine as brightly as other areas of town, but she also doesn’t want to see it lose its historical identity.

“I think it could stand improvement, for sure, but I don’t want it to ever lose the old Coeur d’Alene feel. But I think that’s going to happen, because that’s the way the money is funneled, to that new development.”

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