

Branson Residents Weigh in on Plans

Branson -- The city of Branson took the next step in developing a comprehensive plan that will direct city leaders for the next 20 years.

At the Branson High School auditorium, residents gathered at two separate meetings to answer several questions about what they would like to see in the city's future. The same questions can be answered online at the city's website.

John Fishpaw said that he and his wife moved to Branson three years ago from the Dallas area and he is enjoying the process that allows the community to help develop the comprehensive plan.

"I see this as a way to reattach to my community," he said.

The process began in the spring when the city hired Design Workshop, of Denver, to direct the project. The company, the city's planning department and a steering committee of residents held meetings with various community groups before introducing the comprehensive plan process to the general public at an August workshop at the Branson Convention Center. Thursday's meeting was intended to narrow down what officials had learned so far.

"We got some answers then where we weren't necessarily sure what they meant," said Rebecca Zimmermann, president of Design Workshop.

For instance, in August, respondents indicated they would like to see more diversity of activities in the area. Therefore, the current questions offer respondents several choices as to what types of activities they would prefer. In at least one of the sessions last week, those in attendance favored cultural arts and an aquarium.

Some audience members expressed frustration that they did not know how to answer because they weren't certain if government spending, or even a tax increase, would be necessary. On a question about preserving downtown buildings, one audience member said he did not know how to answer because he supports preserving buildings but not if the owners' rights are restricted.

Zimmermann said that many items would have to be handled by the private sector, but that those specifics would be addressed in later workshops.

Afterward, Branson Planning Director Jim Lawson echoed what Zimmermann said.

"You have to start with what you want, and then look at how you would pay for it," Lawson said.

"There may be some things you can't pay for in 10 years, but if you never start planning for it, you'll never get there."

As an example, Zimmermann pointed to a comprehensive plan she guided in California.

"We identified 24 sources of funding but there were only two that could be done right away," she said.

She said she recently participated in a comprehensive plan in California in which 24 possible funding sources were identified.

Bob Huels, of Commercial One Broker, is skeptical of the entire comprehensive plan process.

"My concern is that (the questions) are leading; they don't determine what people really want," he said. "For instance, who wouldn't want more open space (park land)? But no one mentions that someone's land has to be taken away or made where the owner can't use it. Taking away property rights is not the American way, but it is suddenly the Branson way."

Branson architect Tom Treat, however, said that this process is important for Branson's future. He said he has had some discussions in the past with Branson's planning department.

"We've had a lot of discussions the last couple of years about Branson being tired-looking, particularly on the Strip," he said. "It's been a hodgepodge growth. There needs to be an effort to unify the architectural fabric of the strip."