

Downtown Redefined: \$750M redevelopment plan unveiled

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New Brunswick: A development vision unveiled by Mayor Jim Cahill yesterday would redefine New Brunswick's downtown.

With a 30-story office tower, a train-station plaza, a public park and pedestrian oriented boulevard leading to it and an area for medical and biotechnological facilities, the concept is "the next state of revitalization," Cahill said yesterday during an editorial board meeting at the Home News Tribune.

More than new office buildings, "The CORE (Commercial, Office, Research, Entertainment) Vision Plan" would overcome the development barrier presented by the city's elevated train tracks and also realign the health-care industry's expansion by bringing the medical campus south of the rails. If completely built, the plan would represent a \$750 million investment, said Christopher J. Paladino, President of the New Brunswick Development Corp., who presented the plan with Cahill and City Planning director Glenn Patterson.

The development plan was designed by Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, a world-renowned architectural firm based in New York City. SOM studied a triangular area of the city between the Raritan River, New Street and the railroad tracks along Albany Street and concentrated on a western section bounded by George and New Streets and the railroad tracks, said SOM chairman Marilyn Taylor.

Taylor said "The CORE Vision Plan" would:

- Create a civic plaza next to the train station, claiming it for people and making vehicles secondary
- Demolish Ferren Mall and parking deck and replace it with a 500,000-square-foot tower of 30 or more stories that could house corporate headquarters, retail and parking
- Transform Spring Street from a narrow, one-way road into a two-way, pedestrian oriented gateway leading from the train station to Bayard Street, toward the Cultural Center and Monument Square
- Create a public park on Elm Row between Bayard and Paterson streets that could have a stage for lunchtime performances
- Develop a biotechnology, medical and commercial area on four blocks at Bayard Street and Joyce Kilmer Avenue
- Construct an office building at Spring and Church streets and a second building on Bayard Street next to the former First Union Bank
- Build a residential site on Easton Avenue between Somerset Street and the train tracks with 150 to 250 units, perhaps for commuters, and retail space on ground level
- Facilitate north-south connections and alleviate crosstown traffic confusion by extending Kirpatrick Street to French Street and enhancing Joyce Kilmer Avenue as a

medical services street

- Create the potential for more entertainment options with new restaurants and perhaps a new theater
- Balance parking supply between residential and office demands

The plan would add 1.5 million square feet of office space, 250,000 square feet of retail space, and 450,000 square feet of laboratory space, said Paladino. About 7,400 parking spaces would replace 1,000 existing spaces, he said.

Cahill said he could see parts of the plan happening within two or three years. The potential full build out of the plan would take about 10 years, he said.

"I think this is a very realistic plan, " Cahill said.

The biotechnology and office development at Bayard Street and Joyce Kilmer Avenue is proposed for four blocks containing houses and small offices. But the city and Devco did no analysis about how many residents or small businesses would be displaced.

"That's the next step of things because that all goes into our cost analysis, " said Paladino.

Cahill said, "If potential relocation should stop us from future redevelopment, we'd get nothing accomplished."

The city will seek public input about the plan by sitting down with certain individuals and then generating a report to share with the public at large, Cahill said. City officials will be ready to begin obtaining public opinion in late April or early May, the mayor said. "We're looking for the input of the public and anyone else who wants to comment on it," he said.

The city has already discussed the plan's concept with major city institutions like Johnson & Johnson and the medical community.

With the first step- planning - completed, the city will now begin marketing the concept to the private sector, Cahill said.

"You put it out there with a broad brush and see what comes back," he said.

Cahill emphasized the plans presented yesterday were just a concept. Paladino said the only guarantee was that the final result would not look exactly like the current plan.

But Cahill, Paladino and Taylor said having a plan means the city can jump on a development opportunity when one presents itself.

"Cities are basically opportunistic places. That's what makes them great," said Taylor. "You can't predict what will happen."

Paladino said, "If you're not always moving forward, you're moving backward."

The city already has \$300 million of downtown development projects in the planning or construction phases and those buildings should be finished in the next 36 months, said Paladino.

New Brunswick has all the components to build on the revitalization the city has already experienced, Taylor said.

"We believe in real urbanism. New Brunswick has all the pieces of it," said Taylor. "now it's time to up the ante one more time."

Cahill said the concept for the downtown will help other areas of the city.

"I don't think anything happens on the side of town that doesn't have a spillover effect on another side of town," said Cahill. "There's got to be an impact and it's got to be positive."

SOM, which has completed more than 10,000 architecture and urban planning projects including Union Station in Washington, D.C. and EuroDisney, began working on the New Brunswick plan nine months ago. Devco is paying SOM's fee, which is approaching \$100,000 so far, Paladino said.

"The CORE Vision Plan" may be only a concept now but city and Devco officials are confident many of the components of the proposal will be achieved.

"I don't think it's the kind of thing we'll be dusting off in a few years and asking 'What happened?' I think we'll be checking things off the list, " said Paladino.

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