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New master plan to reimagine Harbor Beach

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HARBOR BEACH —

Several residents and business owners turned out Thursday to brainstorm ideas for the city's future.

The day-long planning event took place at Harbor Beach City Hall and was geared to help city planners collect input for the city's 20-year master plan. Business owners met with representatives from McKenna Associates early Thursday afternoon to discuss their ideas for zoning and future businesses in the city. At 6:30 p.m., residents and business owners were invited back for a community planning session, during which McKenna Associates collected ideas to use when creating the master plan.

Amy Chesnut, senior principal planner for McKenna Associates, said community input is vital to creating a plan that is relevant to residents' needs and desires. McKenna, based in Northville, was hired by the city to help create the master plan.

"It's your plan," she told the residents and business owners in attendance at Thursday evening's meeting. "We need to hear from you what your ideas are, things you like about your community and things about the community you think could be improved."

Chesnut said the city's current plan has not been updated for 10 years, and state planning requires cities review the plan every five years.

"So, you're due," she said. The plan, she said, will be the foundation for how the city creates its zoning regulations, but the guidelines are not something that is written in stone.

"It's a plan: It's not the law," Chesnut said. "Just because it's written in the plan doesn't mean 'thou shalt do it.'"

Chesnut said updating the master plan is a process that takes about a year, and McKenna has been working on the project for about four months. So far, the group, has toured and analyzed the Harbor Beach area, and they now are in the stage where they need to know what residents want.

The goal, she said, is to build upon the assets the city currently has while reimagining the city's potential for the future.

According to a presentation by McKenna, the group is focusing on:

- Capitalizing on Harbor Beach's numerous assets.
- Creating a "Harbor Beach identity."
- Engaging residents and stakeholders throughout the process.

A "stakeholder" is anyone who works, lives or plays in Harbor Beach.

Chesnut said the master plan should respond to the changing economy by creating a community that will attract talent and jobs and make Harbor Beach a place where people want to live, work and visit. The master plan also should address the needs of all residents, including seniors, young adults, children and empty-nesters.

One area McKenna plans to address in the master plan is divisions, or "nodes," within the city. McKenna's director of design, Courtney Piotrowski, said there are a number of great areas of activity, but those areas are not connected to each other in a way that makes travel between them convenient. For example, she said the north end of town has a museum and a park, but not everyone who visits Harbor

Beach knows about the recreational opportunities.

"Somebody visiting downtown might not even know these things exist up there," she said.

While the city has made a start at connecting the nodes of activity with trails, Piotrowski said the new master plan should call for a greater effort.

"It's important to think about how pedestrians move within those spaces," she said. "... We have a lot of great stuff here. We just need to figure out how to bring everything together."

Other challenges McKenna noted include the area's aging population, the fact that youth are leaving the area for work, and an overall decrease in population.

"These things may sound kind of negative, but we need to know what we're facing and how to plan for it," Piotrowski said.

One opportunity for improvement, she noted, was the demolition of grain elevators near the water, which will give the city an opportunity for more waterfront viewing areas.

During the community planning session Thursday evening, about 25 to 30 stakeholders filled three large tables, which were covered with two large sheets of paper, one labeled "favorites" and the other labeled "fixes."

After watching the presentation, people were asked to use the papers as they brainstormed ideas to improve the city. Each table then posted their top three ideas for fixes and favorites on the wall, and everyone at the meeting was asked to place red stickers next to the items they think are the most important.

Top vote getters for "fixes" included:

- The addition of a grocery store.
 - Design the waterfront.
 - Beautification of downtown buildings.
 - The addition of a swimming pool/senior and family complex.
 - The addition of a motel/hotel.
 - The addition of a band complex.
 - Develop other properties along the lakefront.
- Top vote getters for "favorites" included:
- The Waterfront
 - Area institutions (schools, hospital, etc.)
 - Bike path, pier and park system.
 - The lighthouse and breakwall.

Resident and business owner Jan Langley said she attended Thursday night's meeting because she feels the city needs many improvements, and she'd like to help with the planning.

Langley and her children were born in Harbor Beach. She moved away for work, but returned about two years ago. She said she's glad the city is working on making improvements, as they are long overdue.

"I've got lots of memories about this city — my father coruing home, pounding his fist on the table because he was so angry at the city because nothing had been done," Langley said.

She said there were many problems with the city when she was a child, and when she moved back, nothing had improved. "I came back, and it's worse. It's my hometown, and I love it I just want to see it prosper," she said.