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Brighton tries to build a solid future on a preserved past

The City Council soon will hear a plan about making sure the downtown remains vibrant and is not left in the shadows of development at its edge.

By Margaret Jackson
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Redevelop the armory into a civic center. Improve parking. Spruce up the facades of historic buildings.

If Brighton wants to preserve its historic core and position it for future growth, consultants recommend those and other changes.

The city hired Dana Crawford and J. Kemper Will last year to help it develop a strategic plan for its downtown, where most buildings on the four main blocks were constructed before 1900.

By mid-March, Brighton's Urban Renewal Authority will develop and present to the City Council a work plan to implement recommendations it considers priorities, said Manuel Esquibel, assistant city manager. It also plans to consult with downtown merchants and property owners.

Among the recommendations that will take priority are:

Make downtown clean and safe by adding landscaping, lighting, outdoor seating, signage and parking management.

Improve the corner of Main and Bridge streets to make it more pedestrian-friendly. Work could include wider sidewalks, better crosswalks, traffic-calming measures and improved sign age.

Improve the facades of historic buildings on the first two blocks of North Main Street.

Improve connections with the Brighton Pavilions, a shopping center that opened in 2005, and provide better signage throughout the area.

The next step is finding money to accomplish those goals.

The city has allocated \$150,000 for projects in 2007. The money could be used as a match to establish a revolving fund. BURA plans to budget funds to leverage other resources and can use tax increment financing. Money also is available through the Colorado Historical Society.

Community development corporations could be established for specific purposes, and bonds could be issued to fund larger projects.

At least one business group felt good enough about downtown Brighton's potential to invest even before the face-lift. Gary Plock, his wife, Pam, and partner Paul Greaves opened Mojo's Restaurant in late January across from the Pavilions. Located in a 1930s-era brick building, the 8,500-square-foot sports bar and restaurant has 18 plasma screens and serves everything from fish and chips to Kansas City strip steaks. Greaves also owns The Hornet Restaurant in Denver.

"The response has been huge," said Plock, who serves on the urban renewal authority board. "Everybody who walks through the door says, 'This is what we've been waiting for.' There's nothing like this in Brighton."

Longer-term recommendations include using funding from the library bond issue, plus funds from the Colorado Historical Fund, to redevelop the old armory into a civic center that would give music, dance and theater groups a performance space.

"We're very interested in making that come to reality," Crawford said.

With large-scale development occurring on the outskirts of town, the effort is considered critical to preserving the downtown's vitality.

The effort comes as new businesses open at Prairie Center, a project being developed by St. Louis-based THF Realty near Interstate 76.

"Any new investment downtown will hopefully help the existing businesses, and any assistance we can provide to existing businesses will encourage reinvestment," Esquibel said.

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