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NEWS

Plan envisions Fort Dodge of the future

Slater: Community, economic development central to project

By **BILL SHEA**, Messenger staff writer

Imagine lacing up your most comfortable walking shoes and taking a stroll through downtown Fort Dodge. Along the way, you'll pass small shops housing artists and cafes with music and the smell of good food wafting out onto the sidewalk.

Ahead of you, the door to a restaurant opens and five people in business suits step out. Probably executives from one of the many renewable energy companies now in town, you guess.

When you reach the Des Moines River, you find the city's nationally known attraction — the Midwest's Only Boardwalk. Step onto it, turn north and you could walk all the way to Harlan and Hazel Rogers Sports Complex. Turn south and you can get to the Gypsum City Off Highway Vehicle Park.

Along the way, you might see a sign advertising the relocated Fort Museum and Frontier Village, plus the new Gypsum Mining Museum. On the boardwalk you'll also see the emergency call boxes that can be used to summon the police, firefighters or an ambulance.

Most of those sights and sounds don't exist in Fort Dodge yet. But a new 91-page draft of a consultant's report envisions the community transforming to include the items found on that imaginary stroll.

Called Envision 2030, the draft is the result of in-depth research and public focus group sessions conducted early this year by The Slater Group of Woodstock, Ga. That firm was hired by the City Council last September to prepare both a broad 20-year vision for the community's future and a more specific five-year plan to guide city government actions.

The company is being paid \$28,500.

The first of its work — the draft vision statement — is being unveiled this week.

Community and economic development are the themes of the whole project, according to Roger Slater, the leader of the firm that bears his last name.

Growing the city through tourism and by attracting more people to live here is the major strategy, he said Tuesday afternoon during a public presentation at the Fort Dodge Public Library. About 25 people attended.

Expanded parks and recreation opportunities are vital to drawing people to the town because, he said, "Everybody wants something to do."



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The boardwalk concept is one of those recreation opportunities. The Envision 2030 draft also calls for a bridge to the island in the middle of the river. It includes an indoor aquatics and recreation center.

Entertainment is but one of five major areas the report addresses. Education, an entrepreneurial atmosphere, the environment and energy are also examined.

Schools both public and private would be a community drawing card, Slater said.

"We're looking for an educational system that is so great that it is a draw, if not the major draw, to the community," he said. "People will want to go to school here."

The draft plan foresees a day when local students not only master English, but learn a second language such as Mandarin Chinese, Arabic or Spanish.

Providing free access to broadband Internet service is one of the plan's suggestions for improving the entrepreneurial atmosphere. Slater said that free access would help make Fort Dodge "the hottest place in the Midwest for doing business overseas."

Securing what Slater called a "supreme water supply" will be a major step to securing the city's environment in the future. The draft calls for creating small lakes within the city limits. Managing storm water properly before the federal government steps in and imposes a solution on the city is also recommended in the report.

Capitalizing on the biofuels industry to become the "energy focal point for the U.S." is another key recommendation, according to Slater.

There were a few questions from people at Tuesday's session, but no one raised any objections to the proposal.

"In a way, he's telling us what we have and what we need to encourage the development," said Clarence Rice, of Fort Dodge. "We've got a lot of stuff happening. We don't promote it."

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