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West End wish list is in

By JACKIE MAJERUS, Herald Press Staff



Concerned residents take notes during the West End visioning workshop Saturday morning at the Bristol Boys & Girls Club. Mike Orazzi | The Herald Press

BRISTOL — When more than 40 people — residents, landlords, business owners, city officials and others — gathered Saturday to talk about the West End, it wasn't hard for them to come to a consensus on what the future of the neighborhood should be.

It should be a clean, litter-free, well-maintained, safe place where people can — without fear — walk on sidewalks and bike on trails along the free-flowing

Pequabuck River, past Muzzy Field and through Rockwell Park. They'd know their neighbors and be able to gather socially with them, shop in nice little stores and dine in an assortment of restaurants, all right in the neighborhood.

The city would take care of the streets and police officers would be familiar to those who live and work in the neighborhood, responding when called on for help.

Kids would hang out at the new Family Center / Bristol Boys & Girls Club complex in the former Chic Miller dealership lot.

Churches — and the festivals they offer — would thrive, and every so often there would be a community block party, where old friends would get together and new ones would meet.

Decrepit eyesores would be a thing of the past, following a blight crackdown by the city and investment in the West End.

People would be proud to live and work there, and newcomers would be clambering to get in. The West End would be "in."

Such was the dream that emerged from the "visioning" workshop put on by The Capstan Group, a consulting firm hired by the city to come up with a plan for the beleaguered neighborhood.

"You want this to be a place where people want to be," said Lisa Grossman of The Capstan Group.

Though the reality falls far short of the dream, the dream is where change might begin. More workshops will follow, with a "slightly different focus," said Grossman, to further the project.

City Planner Alan Weiner, who was pleased with the turnout, said the workshop was the best one he's ever been part of in 25 years on the job.

"You people did an awesome job," Weiner enthused. "There's a lot more work to be done. This is just the beginning. It may be my job, but it's your neighborhood."

"I think everybody has the same concerns," said resident Nick Piotrowski, who said he hoped the Capstan study would reflect what the people said, and not merely what city leaders want it to say.

West End homeowner Chet Reed said he's watched the neighborhood "going downhill" as fewer residents have a stake there.

Landlord Steve Deveau said the issue of safety is paramount. He said he's never had so much trouble finding tenants as he has now. He said current tenants are afraid to make reports to the police when there is a problem.

"Everybody wants to be safe," Deveau said. "That has to be addressed first."

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Most of the more than three-hour session was spent in small groups, where participants addressed a primary issue, like what to do with some of the large vacant parcels, environmental concerns with the river and the park, transportation and safety.

Sometimes the exchanges got lively.

Business owner David Hamelin said the mechanisms are in place within the city's zoning regulations and other ordinances to make the changes needed, if the laws are enforced.

City Councilor Ken Cockayne said Bristol is "aggressively pursuing the blight in our community."

Reed, a former city councilor, said he made many of the same proposals more than a decade ago.

"Why was it such a battle?" Reed asked.

"We're making changes in our neighborhoods," Cockayne said. "I believe we've turned the corner and we're going in the right direction."

But Reed said the same pile of garbage has been sitting in Rockwell Park for a year and a half. He said the city was going through "this big exercise" of having a visioning meeting and paying consultants when simple things that could make a big difference are left undone.

"We're not here to bitch," Hamelin told Reed.

"Maybe I'm at the wrong meeting," responded Reed, who said it was little more than a feel-good exercise.

Jesse Jablon, who summarized for the whole workshop the safety issues his group tackled, questioned whether the sight of five teenagers wearing hooded sweatshirts on the corner should be cause for concern.

"Do we need to be afraid of them? Are they causing problems? The fear is there. It has to be addressed," said Jablon, making an appeal for neighborhood cops who know the community. "The police presence that exists is random."

He asked how the new skatepark at Rockwell Park would be policed.

With Muzzy Field, Rockwell Park, The Family Center, the Imagine Nation children's museum and strong churches, the West End has a lot going for it, Jablon told the group.

"The neighborhood has more to offer than other neighborhoods in the city," Jablon said. "We have such a good start with the quality-of-life issues."

To find out more about the study, go to www.cpstn.com/westend.

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