

PETOSKEY News-Review

Speaker lauds downtown offerings

By Ryan Bentley News-Review Staff Writer
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As a prominent downstate planning consultant sees it, downtown Petoskey has much to offer shoppers.

“Your downtown, if you don’t know it, is a model for downtowns around the United States to revitalize themselves,” Birmingham-based Robert Gibbs said during a presentation Wednesday.

But Gibbs, a specialist in urban retail planning, also believes the business district’s visibility is limited for motorists passing by on U.S. 31, and that sprawl-related aesthetic issues exist along corridors leading into the city.

Gibbs has given three presentations this summer to the downtown community. About three dozen people attended one of these, sponsored by Petoskey’s Downtown Management Board, Wednesday at City Park Grill.

“Bob’s donating his time to us as we make an effort to plan regionally,” said Petoskey Regional Chamber of Commerce downtown director Becky Goodman.

Gibbs described the central business district as “compact” and “very walkable,” and noted that it boasts anchor destinations such as a library, multiple restaurants and a J.C. Penney Co. department store.

But with U.S. 31 traffic routed along the perimeter of the downtown, Gibbs said motorists passing through the area have limited opportunities to see the retail offerings that exist there.

Gibbs said local leaders may want to plan for U.S. 31 to help give it more of a downtown flavor, noting that successful development of the block that’s home to the stalled Petoskey Pointe project may play a part.

“Someone will come along and do it,” he said.

Gibbs also pointed out examples of restaurants and retail outlets along the U.S. 31, U.S. 131 and M-119 corridors where he’s seen sprawl-related aesthetic concerns, like a lack of landscaping and unattractive signage.

“Parcel by parcel, you’re becoming suburban Detroit,” he said. “I’m not advising that you shouldn’t have growth. You should have a Wal-Mart here. You should have a Target here. But it shouldn’t be the cheapest (version) that they build.”

The consultant suggested that downtown leaders have a dialogue with officials in Bear Creek Township, which is home to much of the area’s recent commercial growth.

“I think you really need to have a stakeholder meeting to help them determine what they’re allowing is a future sprawl slum,” he said.

Planning and zoning matters in Bear Creek are under the jurisdiction of Emmet County. In a phone interview, assistant county planning director Tammy Doernenburg noted that county officials are looking to address concerns such as landscaping and sign aesthetics.

“We’re trying to add those things in our zoning ordinance as we update it, yes,” she said.

Doernenburg said county officials would be willing to participate in a dialogue with Petoskey about those topics, as did Bear Creek supervisor Dennis Keiser.

“We’d be open to talking to anybody so that the standards are the same, or I guess more consistent, from one community to the other,” Keiser said.

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