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CRA chair claims incentives needed for large projects; Rebates and tweaking of ordinances discussed

By **MATT BLUMENFELD**,
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Big changes in the form of major projects that would shape the face of the downtown can come to Cape Coral, but the city has to back the mission to the hilt and raise development incentives, the Community Redevelopment Agency's chairman told the City Council on Monday.

"In order for us to succeed downtown we must incentivize the initial transitional projects, it is simply the only way to get there," said John Jacobsen.

Staffers have completed a rewrite of the CRA agreement to allow more than 50 percent of the tax increment financing, or TIF, funds collected on a project to go back to the developer as a form of rebate. State laws allow for 100 percent.

Jacobsen said the CRA board may ask council to tweak ordinances and resolutions on its end to speed up the process as he is somewhat worried that the rewrite could get held up in the bureaucratic process for more than a year, which could delay major projects in the permitting stage.

"Those numbers do not work for any of the projects in development," planning manager Annette Barbaccia said of the current TIF limits.

Utilities installation and stormwater solutions are also critical to encouraging development in the downtown, Jacobsen said. He also hinted at a retooling of the area's parking requirements, saying that it is possible that new projects in the core area of the CRA may not have to provide on-site parking.

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“We have more parking spaces than we could ever possibly use,” Jacobsen said, emphasizing the need for shared and multiple-use parking.

Frank Schnidman, of Florida A&M’s Center for Urban and Environmental Solutions, pointed to the creation of City Place in West Palm Beach, Fla., as an example of how even a region laden with blight can become a regional destination. Before its reinvention, City Place was a 77-acre area with a severe drug and violence problem.

“This was the most horrific neighborhood in West Palm Beach, you wouldn’t want to go there in the daytime,” said Jacobsen.

In just 18 months, private developers teamed with the city to change it into an area that is now packed with visitors on a daily basis. Schnidman said the transformation could not have happened without public dollars, a strong commitment from elected municipal officials and policies that helped developers craft the new vision for City Place.

“City Place was a marvelous place to be,” said Councilmember Jim Burch, who recently traveled to the area with CRA board members and staffers. “It shows that ... the concept of doing something against all odds is possible.”

Jacobsen told the council that downtown Cape Coral fits the model for a regional shopping district, pointing to the 1.3 million square feet of retail space that it can support.

A preliminary report of a market study the CRA conducted shows that the areas within a five-minute drive of the downtown is “leaking” \$74.1 million a year in spending to other parts of the city or to Fort Myers that could be spent in the CRA if it had the right establishments.

“This is where most of the city of Cape Coral live, and in that area we have one and a quarter grocery stores,” Jacobsen said of southeast Cape. “We have such a gap in what we could have down there compared to what we do have there it’s unbelievable.”



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