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Work begins on downtown makeover

By JEFF CULL, jcull@news-press.com

Now that the city council has approved the concept of the Community Redevelopment Agency's downtown development plan, officials say the real work begins.

The next step in the process that will transform the artist's renderings into bricks and mortar will be to change the zoning rules in the 340-acre downtown area, said CRA executive director Chet Hunt.

"That's where the rubber meets the road," Hunt said. "It's the policy that makes all this work."

The zoning changes would allow for what town planners Dover, Kohl & Partners envision as extensive use of the waterfront, pedestrian friendly streets and sidewalks, and residential buildings coexisting with commercial structures.



FUTURE OF CAPE: An artist's rendering by Dover, Kohl & Partners shows a draft design of a new waterfront town square at Bikini Basin near the entrance to the city from the Cape Coral Bridge. *File photo*

Click on image to enlarge.

changes approved by the city in late summer. It's all part of keeping the project's momentum.

"We're clipping along pretty good," he said. "We need to sustain it."

City council unanimously approved the plan at Monday's meeting. That approval puts the CRA in the position to start actively seeking private developers for downtown development.

"You don't start marketing until you have a good story to tell," said Victor Dover, a partner in the Miami design firm. "The city council has given us that good story."

However, the CRA will have do without one element that has helped other cities with downtown redevelopment — the lack of government buildings.

Cities such as Fort Pierce have used public funds to make government buildings the central anchors of their downtown. In that east coast city a new library and government complex brought in workers to use the downtown restaurants and shops.

Local land planner Bill Spikowski, who will be writing the zoning changes for Dover, Kohl, said that one of the changes will be to liberalize the downtown parking requirements. That allows developers to use more of their property for buildings while taking advantage of on-street parking.

"In downtowns, with pedestrian-friendly streets, the parking regulations should be less restrictive," he said.

Hunt said he expects to keep with the CRA's aggressive schedule and have the zoning

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Cape Coral has always placed its government complexes in more central locations and changes to that program seem unlikely, especially with city growth moving north.

But the lack of public buildings doesn't sway Dover.

"I'm of the opinion that you can do this without the cultural and government presence," he said, explaining that private developers will take up the slack.

While work continues on the implementation phase of the plan, CRA officials have been busy with other projects designed to add to the lure of downtown.

In January, the city agreed to purchase a 30,000-square-foot property on Southeast 46th Lane and the Malaga Canal. CRA officials believe that it could become the center of pedestrian-friendly area of shopping, entertainment and residential units.

A new \$1.3 million bus transfer station is expected to open next month at Southeast 47th Terrace and Eighth Court. The CRA has also committed \$160,000 for streetscape improvements for the widening of Cape Coral Parkway, which is under way.

The CRA receives its money from property taxes generated by the increased value of downtown property. Next year, the CRA is expecting to receive about \$280,000, according to Hunt.

Dover, Kohl was paid \$158,000 for the master plan and will receive an additional \$23,650 for the implementation phase.

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