

Business News

Tweaking the Urban Renewal Plan

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Demolition is apparent to anyone driving around downtown Tuscaloosa these days. Buildings are coming down, but there's no evidence of construction - not yet, anyway. The Urban Renewal/Redevelopment Plan, which has been in the works for almost three years, is finally being put into action, prompting leaders to make tweaks to the plan that was approved by the City Council in June 2005.

The centerpiece of this revitalization will be Tuscaloosa's new federal building and public park. The General Services Administration, the federal agency in charge of designing and constructing the federal building, recently released the architect contracted for the design and is now advertising for a new architect, according to project coordinator Jason Walker of Almon Associates, Inc. Although the plan originally estimated the completion date of the building for January 2009, this setback will probably move it back a year. Walker explained that although the city is responsible for acquiring the property, the GSA will be paying for it, to the tune of roughly \$50 million.

The public park that will be created adjacent to the federal building has been expanded from a block and a half to two full blocks in the revised plan. The half-block addition will use space that called for private development in the original plan. "When we started, eminent domain was not the firestorm it has become," explained Connie Cooper of Cooper Consulting Co., Inc. "We had envisioned using eminent domain, but that is now clearly not an option. It makes more sense to turn this into public use, not retail and residential."

Planners hope that the park in the middle of downtown will help to encourage what they call the "24/7 population" to spend more time downtown and energize the downtown night life. Plans are also in the works for residential areas in the heart of downtown, including town homes and residences around the park.

One such residential area will be the top floor of the proposed parking deck on 23rd Avenue at the western end of the park. Sen. Richard Shelby has acquired \$6 million over five years to fund the construction of the parking deck, allowing planners to elaborate on a proposal that has been in the works, but up in the air, since the beginning of the Urban Renewal Plan. The parking deck, which Walker expects to be up and running in two or three years, is slated to be five stories and will incorporate both retail and residential components in addition to parking space. However, the city is waiting for the Alabama Historical Commission to approve the site of the deck.

Although the federal building, park and parking deck will be the dominating elements of the plan, smaller changes are also in the works and will probably be completed before any of the larger projects come to fruition.

"The city has a number of federal grants for streetscape improvements," Walker said. "We'll be taking the best things about existing streetscapes and learn from past experiences" to make downtown streets more attractive and safer for pedestrians. This includes bumping out curbs to make crosswalks narrower and adding brick pavers, similar to crosswalks on Greensboro Avenue. Another major change will be the shift from above-ground utility lines to underground lines, which the city is coordinating in cooperation with Alabama Power.

While all of these projects won't be finished for several years, Walker says that there is already a strong beginning. "Changes are going on already, in a destructive phase. In a year and a half, there will be major positive differences in the federal building construction, the streetscapes should be ready and the park development should be underway," he said.

In addition to the Urban Renewal/Redevelopment Plan, the city planners are also working on the Greater Downtown Plan, which includes everything within the boundaries from Queen City Avenue on the east, 15th Street on the south, Martin Luther King Boulevard on the west and the riverfront on the north.

Tuscaloosa city planner Bill Snowden described this area as "the cake around ice cream" that is the Urban Renewal Area. The Greater Downtown area will incorporate mixed used retail and residential areas to coordinated with the Urban Renewal Area, lending continuity throughout the downtown area.