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EDITORIAL: Lufkin Forward: Long-term results of proposal could positively change Lufkin's trajectory for generations to come

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The efforts to revitalize downtown Lufkin took another step forward this week with the release of a proposed comprehensive plan.

The proposal was released by the Lufkin Economic Development Corporation, Lufkin Forward leadership team and Asakura Robinson, an architectural firm known in big cities nationwide for revisioning cultural centers.

The idea behind the project is to develop downtown Lufkin into a well-built and managed cultural center that would be attractive to the employees of any industry looking to expand. That means giving residents a sense of belonging by creating a place to celebrate and congregate.

Asakura Robinson representatives Brianna Frey and Jessica Williams said now that the group has crafted its vision, it's time to bring it to life. For the purposes of this study, downtown's core is defined as South Angelina Street, West Burke Avenue, South Third Street and West Lufkin Avenue. The study area includes the Pitser Garrison Convention Center and Museum of East Texas.

“We need help prioritizing where and on what downtown should invest in improvements,” LEDC director Bob Samford said when the project began late last year.

The concept plan includes six categories aimed at creating long-term improvements to enhance the overall feeling of downtown.

The goals defined by the group based on the study are to develop a framework for the types of businesses and development downtown should attract; evaluate streetscape, public realm and open space opportunities; and develop marketing and program recommendations, or events.

The Zoom presentation on Thursday focused heavily on the use of parks and open spaces but included multiple interchangeable options on moving forward to make this plan meet the community’s wants.

Those options were to encourage: eating, gathering, entertaining and playing. All four included more shade trees and space for vendors, as well as some space for food trucks.

Another category focused on increasing the variety of retailers and restaurants downtown.

“We heard loud and clear from the priority survey that everyone just wants more diversity of retailers and restaurants and diverse levels of prices and target audiences,” Frey said.

The city and Lufkin EDC have the tools to make this happen at their disposal to make sure there’s “space and avenues for small businesses and entrepreneurs to get off the ground running,” she said. These include grant opportunities and investing in small and minority owned businesses.

Other key aspects of the proposal include:

- Evaluating the creation of a Historic District for downtown, revamping the Facade Improvement Program, changing the mixed-use zoning ordinances and evaluating the creation of a vacancy and maintenance ordinance.
- Enhancing city streets and expanding pedestrian and bicycling areas.
- Updating signage that clearly shows public parking, key areas in downtown and businesses.
- Creating more regularly occurring events by helping the existing merchant association participate in downtown’s growth or by creating a management district charged with the care of the downtown area.
- Branding downtown by creating a logo to tie the area together.

The proposal also offered some interim ideas that could be implemented while work on the long-term objectives is underway. Making more pedestrian zones and seating, implementing shade and concrete painting could be implemented over the summer for relatively little money, Frey said.

The plan still needs to be presented and ultimately approved by Lufkin's City Council and the Lufkin 4B Economic Development Corporation before anything actually moves forward.

And it should be, because as Samford said last year: "The revitalization of downtowns across America is not only driving the economic engine of the community from a retail monetary position. But it's allowing people to move into a new city they'd have never thought of."

If we do this correctly, the long-term results could change the trajectory of Lufkin for generations to come. That would be a win for our community.