

## Revitalization curbs suburban sprawl, officials say

By Ed Marcum  
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Places like Magnolia Avenue, Cumberland Avenue, Central Street and the South Knoxville waterfront hold the key to making Knoxville a more vibrant city, as well as limiting the problems that come with suburban sprawl.

That was the message of planners, architects and others who addressed the League of Women Voters March 18 touting the benefits of infill development - the idea of filling in leftover spaces in established neighborhoods with new development. Encouraging this rather than the endless spread of new subdivisions and shopping centers on unspoiled land ever further from the center of town, they said, not only revitalizes neighborhoods, but lessens the need for new roads, utilities and other infrastructure, lightening the load on taxpayers.

"Why should we do this?" said Mike Carberry, in charge of comprehensive planning with the Metropolitan Planning Commission, as he opened the meeting at the Beck Cultural Exchange Center on Dandridge Avenue in East Knoxville. "We have the public infrastructure already in place. Although it's somewhat deteriorated and not all the time connected, we have the old grid network of roads throughout the city."

Carberry introduced speakers who went into detail on the possibilities with certain areas of the city. Dave Hill, senior director of the South Waterfront Development for the city and a former MPC executive director, was first up.

"We're looking at spending somewhere around \$139 million for public improvements," Hill said. "The whole idea is we are not going to purchase land, assemble it and turn it over to some private developer. We are going to let the private sector deal with its own ownership issues. But we will try to use public improvements as a stimulant to make the decision to invest in the South Waterfront more lucrative."

The city's commitment to South Knoxville will include spending the \$139 million over 20 years on new places to park, new streets, improvements to existing streets, 51.3 acres of new parks, open space and greenways, and a pedestrian bridge connecting the South Waterfront to the University of Tennessee, he said.

Hill displayed a chart showing a market projection that the city would take in \$814 million over 20 years in revenues for its initial \$139 million investment.

Mike Reynolds, MPC planner, talked about possibilities for developing the Magnolia Avenue area.

"These plans are in their infancy right now, so you will probably see them change quite a bit," he said.

As with the South Waterfront, MPC is working on a form-based zoning code that would give developers great flexibility on how they do their projects within restrictions on building heights, street setbacks, square-footage and other variables. As Reynolds outlined the plan, the general goal is a more pedestrian-friendly environment with shade trees, lighting and other elements. Urban development, with buildings closer to the streets and parking in the rear, would be encouraged in some areas and a more suburban look, with boulevard-type road design and wider street setbacks, in others.

The plan calls for urban-type development on Magnolia from the Old City to about Winona Street, then a more suburban section going east to Burlington, then a more urban style in Burlington.

Jeff Archer, MPC planner, said MPC has developed an infill housing overlay zoning that has been put in place in Lonsdale, Oakwood-Lincoln Park and Edgewood Park communities to help guide infill development. Similar to historic overlay zoning, it is an extra layer of zoning regulations that require builders to submit their proposal to a review board before they can get a building permit.

Anne Wallace, manager of the Cumberland Avenue Project, in which Knoxville is partnering with the Tennessee Department of Transportation on road improvements, said a vision statement that came out of public meetings was to make Cumberland Avenue into the "most vibrant, safe, attractive place in the city."

Even though Cumberland has sidewalks, heavy traffic and the many curb cuts of businesses along the street make it an unappealing place for pedestrians, she said.

One proposal is to put Cumberland on a "road diet," she said - take out two of the four lanes of travel to increase the size of sidewalks and add a center turn lane to reduce traffic congestion. The wider sidewalk would allow landscaping and a better buffer between pedestrians and traffic.

"And ultimately when you get it all in place, there will be more people on the Strip, and it will be a friendly more welcoming environment," she said.

During a question-and-answer session, Knoxville City Council member Bob Becker asked what is to keep these plans from being forgotten in five years as so many others have been. Carberry said getting the form-based code adopted will help, plus the city has shown a commitment to infrastructure improvements.

Knox County Commissioner Mark Harmon said the county could help matters if it would.

"I suppose a little slap at the organization I'm on, but if this is going to work in the city, then County Commission is going to have to stop approving outrageous (development)," he said. "I think MPC is a little too lenient on this, but we overrule MPC and we go with cutting into slopes- things with terrible problems."

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