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Plan eyes higher use for training center

The city needs taxpayers and should place an emphasis on taxpaying development, says business owner Greg Cowley.

Cowley, who recently redeveloped John Cowley & Sons from the ground up, chairs the economic restructuring committee for the Main Street downtown redevelopment program.

Cowley critiqued the first draft of a proposed downtown master plan at the Feb. 2 Farmington Downtown Development Authority meeting. He said he's suggested replacing the Farmington Training Center on Thomas Street with high-end multifamily housing.

"There's an example of people living in downtown space and we are getting tax revenue," he said, adding an attractive wooded area and stairway connection to Shiawassee Park give the redevelopment idea a boost.

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National Main Street planners have also mentioned "a higher use" for that site.

The training and conference center, owned by the Farmington Public Schools, is tax exempt. Supt. Bob Maxfield has heard vague talk about another use for the site, but nobody has approached the district.

"It is working out well for us and I think it is an asset for downtown Farmington," Maxfield said.

The center can bring as many as 300-400 people a day to downtown Farmington. "There's Starbucks, people can run over and buy cards, they can go the post office and take a look in Borders," he said. "They need traffic to have a viable downtown."

On the other hand, businesses haven't come forward to rent the center for their leadership training sessions the way officials had hoped when they revamped the building several years ago.

"I think most of the businesses around here have their own auditoriums and large group spaces," Maxfield said.

He added that the center is used everyday and other areas within a quarter mile of Grand River are also underused.

The FTC is used for FPS staff development and offices, and a potential for greater use exists. A staff development council made up of curriculum directors and superintendents from the seven southwest Oakland school districts meet with Curriculum Director Jerry Fouchey once a month to talk about how the facility could be better used, Maxfield said.

"I don't think anybody has put any price tags on it,"

Maxfield said. "It's real premature and it hasn't come to our board at all."

Cowley also had strong opinions about the rest of the plan. He felt certain "sacred cows" were side-stepped and talked about parking logistics, recruiting three new restaurants and resulting traffic.

"That plan, as it sits there today, does not have enough parking for a five- to 10-year projection, which is what any restaurateur would look to do if they came into the market place," Cowley said. "They would sign leases on five and look to go to 10 to reap return on their investment."

Drawing a major retailer and other "infill" development requires looking at solutions other than proposed deck parking, Cowley said.

"All of this has to be phased. As we start trying to retain businesses and recruit new ones, we can't have the whole town torn up," he said.

Revisions will continue on the conceptual downtown plan developed by the Grissim-Metz and Langworthy Strader LeBlanc & Associates Inc. firms. A final document should come before city officials sometime this spring.

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