

Ponoka moves to put a new face on downtown

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PONOKA — Developing a main attraction and filling empty lots will help rejuvenate the downtown, says an urban design expert.

Avi Friedman toured Ponoka's downtown with town leaders on to see how to improve its appearance.

The professor from Montreal's University of McGill School of Architecture could tell the downtown was active, but said it needed new vision.

"I saw many empty lots on which buildings could be constructed," said Friedman on Saturday.

He also noticed there were no anchors, such as a performing arts centre or a modern library, that would draw people to the area.

"I want to see a building that makes me go 'Wow!'," Friedman said.

Town leaders invited Friedman to share some ideas as part of the Retooling Downtown Project — a community effort to boost economic development, improve quality of life for citizens and businesses, and provide an architectural vision for the downtown core.

Mayor Larry Henkelman said they need long-term plans for the growing town.

He's been receiving more calls from out-of-town investors who hear Ponoka is "on the move." A plan with building designs and other streetscape details would be nice to give to them. "This (project) will also put the town on a theme," Henkelman said.

The first phase of the project involved bringing Friedman to town so he could get a look at the downtown, share ideas and invite public input. If town council approves, Friedman and his team would start on phase two — designing an architectural design master plan.

Friedman said he expects the master plan would span 15 to 20 years and address transportation, land uses, buildings, parks and open spaces.

A budget for developing the plan hasn't been ironed out.

The third and final phase of the project would be to use the master plan as a design guideline for co-ordinating future development.

Friedman's presentation, which included photos of downtown enhancement projects in Drayton Valley and Lethbridge, drew about 40 people to the Royal Canadian Legion on Saturday.

He said some changes could be done right away, while others may require long-term municipal budgeting.

Businesses can also contribute to make projects happen, he said.

"A town of 6,000 like Ponoka can have a beautiful performing arts centre. It doesn't have to seat hundreds of people."

Henkelman said it's important to see if the public wants a long-range plan before the project moves forward.

Those gung-ho about the project include members of the local Chamber of Commerce and economic development board.

"They have a real positive attitude," said Henkelman, a downtown furniture and appliance store owner.

Bruce Blackmore, a member of a economic development subcommittee and owner of Bruce's Tru Value Hardware, said he'd like to see the downtown project fly.

He said some landscaping and other street enhancements were done about 15 years ago, but the project was dropped.

Blackmore would like to see some store fronts get a facelift, like his 90-year-old building did.

He can see this project snowballing into bigger and better things for the entire community.

"Ponoka really has an opportunity to grow," he said. "We have a lot to offer."
