

Knoxville budget aims to expand downtown momentum (with video)

Planners say momentum starts from center city

By Gerald Witt

Tuesday, May 14, 2013

Jody Freeman won't specify the deeds she watched vagrants doing 12 years ago on the benches of Knoxville's Cradle of Country Music Park.

It was an ugly scene, she said.

"We first moved here, we saw things happening in public that shouldn't happen there," said Freeman, president of FMB Advertising at 145 S. Gay St., and secretary of the 100 Block Association.

But after she moved in across from the park, Freeman said she and other tenants on the 100 block of Gay Street took "ownership" of the neighborhood.

Things improved and cleaned up, she said, and in the late 2000s, Knoxville spent millions of dollars on bridge work and sidewalk repair there.

In what seems to be a capstone for the revived block, Mayor Madeline Rogero proposed \$150,000 for the country music park in her 2013-14 budget proposal. The spending is part of \$850,000 proposed for various projects in and near downtown Knoxville.

"I would like to see some events, some outdoor performances," at the park, Freeman said.

Rick Emmett, Knoxville's downtown coordinator, said that the park money may be spent on public art.

"Maybe some kind of water feature," he said, adding that the city's public art committee would likely be involved.

Rogero's other proposed funds would go to neighborhoods in Downtown North, the Old City and Magnolia Warehouse Redevelopment area under the watch of Bob Whetsel, the city's redevelopment director.

Still other funds, \$100,000 for the downtown improvement fund, would help with the smaller expenses, Emmett said.

“It’s just a fund for us to beautify and increase security,” he said.

Pushing out

The general logic, officials say, behind downtown Knoxville redevelopment has been to start in the city’s center and move outward. Some of the first projects occurred on Market Square and Gay Street.

“They continue the vision of growing from within,” said Bill Lyons, Rogero’s deputy mayor for policy. “We’ve had tremendous success in all these areas.”

Next up in the spread from downtown is proposed work up North Gay Street. The six-lane road there will be narrowed to two lanes between West Magnolia and West Fifth avenues with a proposed \$100,000 from the mayor’s budget. The money would add to \$500,000 in existing funds, Whetsel said.

“It’s kind of the last connecting block on Gay Street,” he said. Light fixtures that match the rest of Gay will also be installed.

Gay Street crosses Jackson Avenue, which would receive \$300,000 in Rogero’s proposal for the Magnolia Warehouse Redevelopment area, pushing east from the Old City.

The work there follows the push-out-from-downtown plans.

“Enhance the pedestrian connection from the parking lot into the heart of the Old City,” Whetsel said.

The parking under James White Parkway and Hall of Fame Drive, between Jackson and Willow avenues lots, is one of the well-known free parking spots near downtown.

“Improved sidewalks and improved lighting to make the area thrive,” Whetsel said.

And as the Gay Street work would dovetail on existing corridor work, so would Jackson Avenue plans. In February, Whetsel told the News Sentinel of plans to make a greenway corridor from World’s Fair Park to Caswell Park using Jackson.

More facades

If the theme for downtown projects is to extend ongoing work, the trend would continue through a proposed \$200,000 in the budget to expand the city’s commercial facade improvement program.

The program has targeted several city neighborhoods since launching in 2005 with \$1.25 million from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Previous neighborhoods where the facade program has worked include the Broadway-Central Avenue area, Five Points, Mechanicsville, the Burlington Business District and the Jackson Avenue Redevelopment Area.

Whetsel said more areas could be added, including storefronts on the Strip along Cumberland Avenue, pushing west.

Studying an area to designate as a redevelopment district costs about \$25,000, Whetsel said.

“There are more facades than there is money,” he said.

By the numbers

Downtown-related items proposed in the budget:

- * \$300,000 — Sidewalk work along Jackson Avenue in the Old City
- * \$200,000 — Expanding and funding the city’s facade improvement program
- * \$150,000 — Cradle of Country Music Park at Summit Hill Drive and Gay Street, possible public art piece and other improvements
- * \$100,000 — Road work on the 500 block of North Gay Street
- * \$100,000 — Downtown improvements fund, which covers incidental expenses downtown

Source: Knoxville 2013-14 proposed operating budget



© 2013 Scripps New paper Group — Online