

State Smart Growth Office Endorses West Cape May Plan for Business District

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WEST CAPE MAY -- The borough's plan to revamp the business district on Broadway, Sunset Boulevard and Park Boulevard was praised by state planners at a presentation Tuesday night.

Executive Director Benjamin Spinelli of state Office of Smart Growth first praised the borough for becoming one of only seven municipalities, among 566 in the state, to achieve endorsement from the office for its planning efforts. This will give the borough an advantage getting grants.

Spinelli then told residents the borough's proposed ordinance making changes to the business district is a step in the right direction.

The changes won't happen overnight and will likely need some private investment and some grants to come about. Artist renderings of what the downtown could look like impressed most that looked at them.

The ordinance, which is still being refined, creates a more pedestrian-friendly downtown. Business could put apartments above them and are rewarded with extra height or square footage for building affordable housing. Parking requirements are also eased and there are incentives to save historic homes rather than raze them. Historic homes are mixed into the district, but owners could put businesses in them and enjoy relaxed parking requirements.

Lack of parking often stymies business, but the proposal would also allow contributions to a fund in lieu of parking. Mayor Pam Kaithern said the borough is looking into sites to create parking lots.

The proposal could lead to a downtown revival that increases tax revenues and halts a decline in year-round residents, while making the district better for the public.

Spinelli said "smart growth" involves several concepts, including a town accessible to pedestrians, developing mixed-use neighborhoods, creating a sense of character or place, preserving open space, offering transportation alternatives, blending new sections with the older ones and making sure there is affordable housing. In short, Spinelli said the new model for a town center is what one looked like in the 1800s. It wasn't a strip mall people had to drive to.

"It was a functional, efficient and sustainable way of living. In the last 50 years, we created a lot of damage to our state," Spinelli said.

He praised the borough's plan for allowing more foot traffic, making businesses more viable, bringing in more tax revenue, thinking about aesthetically pleasing designs and creating more affordable housing. He said a better downtown could increase property values throughout the borough.

The audience had questions for Spinelli and his staff, including Kate Meade as well as Jef Buehler and Heather McCall of Main Street New Jersey, which is within the Office of Smart Growth. Mark Lucas said he comes from Manhattan to his Myrtle Avenue home and does not want to arrive at another city. His concern was parking, lighting and noise.

"My concern is the quality of life," said Lucas.

"It's not going to be another Red Bank, or something like that," Meade said.

Spinelli called it a "modest reworking of the community" and urged Lucas to study the 23-page ordinance.

Some wondered if the plan goes far enough.

"We paid a planner and she wanted to eliminate the commercial parking requirement. We're relaxing it but certainly not eliminating it. I question whether we've gone far enough to get what we want," said Wilbraham Mansion owner Doug Carnes.

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