

Newton plans for heart of the city

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As Newton leaders plan for the future of the city's "core area," there is not a lot of open space that has not yet been developed.

That makes the task of crafting and implementing a land development area plan for the "heart" of Newton all the more challenging — and important.

"This area has been under development since 1850, so there is not a lot of pristine area left," Newton Mayor Robert Mullinax said, quoting from Newton Planning Commission's Core Area Plan. "So our job is to improve upon what is already there and maintain it."

Toward that end, the core area plan presented to Newton City Council on Tuesday tackles eyesore appearance issues, as well as challenges related to "divergent uses within close proximity of each other" — such as property zoned for heavy manufacturing adjacent to residential properties. It even focuses on transportation in the area's future.

Intended to "influence land development patterns for the next 10 to 15 years," according to Newton Assistant Planning Director Alex Fulbright, the core area plan was crafted by the city's planning commission following a drop-in workshop and public hearing for affected citizens. Fulbright said key issues arising from the workshop were identified and narrowed. The

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plan itself, he said, addresses transportation, utilities, economic development, environment, community character and land use.

Newton's core area includes 2,161 acres of land, with 5,659 people residing in 2,591 dwelling units, he said.

"We did have great input (during the public drop-in workshop) and public hearings," Fulbright said, adding about 60-70 people attended the workshop, while 25-30 attended the public hearing. "That did have an impact on what was drafted."

The plan reflects the understanding that N.C. 16 Business, N.C. 10 and U.S. 321 — thoroughfares at the heart of the core area — are often the first and only glance people sometimes have of Newton.

"We want to prepare a landscape plan that people can enjoy," Fulbright said.

That includes finding new prospects for public open space. The proposed plan suggests converting Newton's old public works site into a greenway park.

"That may be a redevelopment opportunity," Fulbright

said. "It could potentially impact the area and also have a tie into downtown."

Citizens also said they want to see more proactive enforcement of existing rules and ordinances in Newton's core area, particularly with respect to junk vehicles, nuisance properties and maintaining community appearance standards.

"The city should develop programs to teach property owners how to better maintain property," Fulbright explained of the plan. "It is important that the city evaluate the appearance of its own facilities and make improvements as needed."

The proposed plan addresses transportation — arguing against plans to four-lane N.C. 16 Business from West Fifth Street to Conover.

Other ideas included in the plan include:

- Promotion of the city's economic vitality by preserving rail service.

- Encourage properties to be added to the National Historic Register.

- Explore creation of a downtown business incubator.

- Evaluate ordinances and

policies that impact under-utilized buildings located along railroad tracks, and look to see if the city's regulations are holding them back from some type of re-use.

The plan also spotlights a need to preserve and protect water quality in Clarks Creek, as well as rehabilitation of the city's infrastructure, such as water and sewer lines.

"Sixty percent of water leaks are in the core area — it's the older part of town — but only 30 percent of the city's water lines are in the area," Fulbright said. "We also have an older system of sewer lines. Fifty miles of sewer lines are in the core area, and of those, 46 miles are terracotta pipes that are prone to roots in joints which causes infiltration of storm water and that decreases the capacity we have."

Newton City Council took no action on the proposed plan, but tentatively scheduled a workshop to discuss it in the future.

"I want to give the Council several days to review this," Mullinax said. "There are things I would like to talk about in here ... There are good things in it and some things that maybe aren't so good."

Citizens can view the core area plan on the city of Newton's website at www.newtonnc.gov/core_area_plan.pdf. Before the plan is approved a public hearing will be set and advertised.

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