

Will Heart of Peoria panel disband?

Commissioners to vote on what to recommend to Peoria City Council

By JOHN SHARP

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PEORIA —

The end could be near for a city panel originally charged with looking for ways to revitalize Downtown Peoria and its surrounding older neighborhoods. Heart of Peoria commissioners will vote Friday to recommend to the City Council whether they should decommission, effective Dec. 31.

Commissioners who believe the nearly five-year-old group should disband cite several reasons: a lack of funding; limited support from city staff members; dwindling agenda topics; and an idea that most of the work the commission was supposed to accomplish is completed.

"We have become (nothing more than) an advocacy group," Commissioner Henry Lawrence said Wednesday. "It seems now might be the time to fade off into the sunset."

Commissioner Joe Richey agreed.

"Our agenda items are pretty weak," he said.

Beth Akeson, the vice chairwoman of the commission, said she looks forward to hearing any comments from city staff about the proposed disbanding of a commission formed in 2004 to offer strategies of implementing the Heart of Peoria plan. That plan was aimed at developing the city's urban core with more pedestrian-friendly ideals.

"I'm very interested in hearing staff's position (on its ability) to advance the ideals of New Urbanism in the city," Akeson said, referring to the concept of making the city more walkable and making buildings more attractive, among other things.

Pat Landes, director of the Planning & Growth Management Department, whose department is in charge of staffing the commission's meetings, said she is interested in listening to the concerns. She said the commission's work has been valued over the years, especially taking the lead in getting the city's new land development code implemented in 2007.

Commissioner C.J. Summers said the group can still be utilized to help implement the code and the principles of New Urbanism within the 8,000-acre Heart of Peoria region, which generally includes Downtown Peoria and its surrounding bluffs.

Summers and other commissioners believe if the group disbands, then it could become a private advocacy panel. Also, by disbanding, the commission could meet more than its regularly scheduled six times during the year, he added.

Summers said the group has received no money for next year to get some things to complete what it wants, including an executive summary of the Heart of Peoria plan that would make it more user-friendly.

If the group votes to disband and the City Council agrees, it would end the work for a commission that was formed by Mayor Dave Ransburg to examine what policies could be implemented under the Heart of Peoria plan, which was introduced in 2002 following a series of intensive work sessions.

Under that plan, Downtown and its outlying areas are to look and feel more like a real urban city than a city trying to be a suburb of strip malls.

In 2007, the commission was instrumental in getting a new zoning code approved. That code, referred to as the land development code, or LDC, was considered somewhat revolutionary for the city in that it changed existing zoning laws in select areas to place a priority on more pedestrian-friendly environments.

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Some key dates:

Jan. 13, 2004: City Council votes 8-2 to form the 13-member Heart of Peoria Commission charged with helping to revitalize the Downtown area and implement the Heart of Peoria plan.

April 2004: Mayor Dave Ransburg selects the original commissioners.

August 2004: City Council votes to move forward with the Heart of Peoria plan.

April 2005: Commission hosts the first of a series of presentations aimed at revitalizing Downtown.

May 15, 2007: City Council votes to implement a new zoning code reflecting the principles of "New Urbanism," which are to make 8,000 acres of the city's Downtown and surrounding older neighborhoods more pedestrian-friendly.

July 2007: City Council agrees to keep the commission intact, despite suggestions from Mayor Jim Ardis to move its members into other city commissions.

November 2007: Zoning Commission approves changes to St. Ann's Catholic Church, prompting some Heart of Peoria commissioners to criticize that the new land development code is not being followed properly.

January 2008: Training sessions held to inform city officials about the zoning changes and New Urbanism.

April 2008: Commissioners push for an executive summary of the Heart of Peoria plan be written to help make it more user-friendly. To this date, nothing has been finalized.

August 2008: Discussion begins again about disbanding the commission.

Dec. 5, 2008: Commission will vote on whether to disband.