

Commission reviews merchants' proposal calling for addition of trees, benches and other changes to attract shoppers

Port Washington officials are planning to give East Grand Avenue in downtown a facelift this year, making the street as attractive an entrance to the shopping district as Franklin Street.

The facelift — one of many projects expected to be funded through a downtown tax incremental financing district and reviewed by the Plan Commission last week — was proposed by the Port Washington Main Street Program, and has long been sought by merchants whose shops line Grand Avenue.

“When you’re on Franklin Street, you feel like you’re in a really festive atmosphere,” Main Street Executive Director Sara Grover said. “Then you turn onto Grand Avenue and it changes completely. It’s especially noticeable during events.

“These changes will make it look more like a shopping district, with amenities that will cause people to pause and linger in the area.”

The project will add some of the same amenities as are found on Franklin Street — including trees, benches and bike racks. Instead of the decorative planters found on Franklin Street, brackets intended to hold hanging baskets will be fastened to light poles.

“We don’t have the space for large planters there,” Grover said. “I think it will give it a really nice punch.”

While the project will include sidewalk reconstruction between the Re/Max United office and the Pebble House that will make the walkway more level, the sidewalks along Grand Avenue won’t be rebuilt with pavers, officials said.

The work is expected to be kicked off this spring when the city plants 40 trees along not only along Grand Avenue east of Milwaukee Street but also on East Main and South Wisconsin streets, Public Works Director Rob Vanden Noven said.

Unlike the Franklin Street trees, he said, these will not be lit with twinkle lights.

Port officials plan Grand Ave. facelift

Written by Kristyn Halbig Ziehm
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Grover said shop owners instead will be asked to light any landscaping they might have.

The city is sympathetic to the merchants' request, Vanden Noven said.

"We have a lot of successful businesses on Grand Avenue now and they want to feel included in the downtown district," he said. "They feel they're not getting as much attention as they deserve, and that people are not going down the street."

Ultimately, the project will also include landscaping on East Grand Avenue between the Harborview Holiday Inn parking lot and the street, Vanden Noven said. However, he said, this work will not be done until at least 2011.

All of the Grand Avenue amenities may not may be put in place this year, Vanden Noven added. "It all depends on the TIF funding," he said.

The financing district was originally proposed by the city last year, but officials delayed work to create it because of concerns about declining property assessments in the area.

Tax incremental financing districts use the taxes paid on the increasing value of properties within their boundaries to pay for public improvements, such as the Grand Avenue streetscaping, that benefit the area.

Among the projects expected to be funded through Port's proposed downtown TIF district are improvements to area parking lots and alleys, signs directing people to city attractions, the conversion of Harborview Lane to a pedestrian way, some improvements to the coal dock property and a performance-based incentive program to lure developers to downtown.

Officials said the district could help promote downtown revitalization as potential developers see the community is willing to invest in the area.

"One thing our (financial) consultant is leery of is there are a lot of front-end costs proposed," Planner Randy Tetzlaff told the Plan Commission last week. "There are a lot of things that need to be done."

Commission member Earl Kelley noted that most of the proposed improvements will not directly affect developments downtown.

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“Are we going to do the work first, then just sit back and wait for things to happen, or are we going to wait until we have somebody ready to do something downtown before we do the work?” he asked.

That decision is up to the Common Council, which has indicated that work needs to be done to “jump start” potential downtown redevelopment, Tetzlaff said.