

City to sharpen downtown upgrade plans

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
Wednesday, 23 June 2010 18:08

Commission will review TIF proposal calling for \$2.3 million in projects, including improvements to parking lots, coal dock

A host of downtown infrastructure improvements — everything from revamped parking lots and alleys to the conversion of Harborview Lane to a pedestrian way — will be discussed by the Port Washington Plan Commission Thursday, June 24.

The improvements, as well as proposed developer incentives, are among the projects in a tax-incremental financing plan that will be reviewed during a 6:30 p.m. public hearing.

“We’re trying to make it a more friendly downtown, especially with the changes to the parking lots to improve traffic flow and the alleys to improve pedestrian movement,” City Administrator Mark Grams said.

“By making the downtown more attractive, hopefully we’ll attract more businesses there.”

The work will also demonstrate the city’s desire to see the downtown redeveloped, officials said.

The projects were scheduled to be reviewed for the first time on Wednesday by the TIF Joint Review Board, which is primarily made up of representatives of the various governmental units affected by the district.

The proposed district, which would contain properties valued at more than \$13 million, would zigzag through the heart of downtown and include a number of vacant buildings that officials have said are ripe for redevelopment.

When these buildings are redeveloped, the increased property taxes would be used to pay for the estimated \$2.3 million in public improvements included in the plan. The money must be repaid within 27 years.

“This will give us the opportunity to do these project without putting the burden on the taxpayers,” Grams said.

Among the expenditures and projects included in the proposed TIF plan are:

- \$90,000 for improvements to the coal dock.
- \$450,000 in improvements to downtown parking lots, including significant changes to the lot behind Smith Bros. Marketplace.
- \$40,000 for alley improvements, most of which are aimed at making it easier for people to get from Franklin Street to the lakefront.
- \$20,000 for downtown signs.
- \$750,000 in developer incentives.
- Officials have said the incentives are needed to attract businesses to the larger vacant

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buildings downtown.

- \$390,000 for street improvements, including the changes to Harborview Lane near the north-slip marina — a project that officials said will provide a landscaped walkway leading from downtown to the stairs that lead to the historic Light Station atop St. Mary's Hill — the creation of a cul-de-sac at the end of South Milwaukee Street and elimination of the cul-de-sac at the east end of East Main Street.

A few of the TIF projects could be undertaken as soon as next year, Grams said, such as streetscaping and leveling of sidewalks on East Grand Avenue.

"Most of the big projects would be done in 2012 or later," Grams said, including the conversion of Harborview Lane and improvements to the parking lot behind Smith Bros. Marketplace.

The TIF district is an important aspect of the city's downtown redevelopment strategy, he said, but it's not the only piece of the puzzle.

The economy, which has stifled development throughout the country, will play a major part, Grams said.

"Everything's still tied into the economy," he said.

Franklin Energy's move to downtown will also help with redevelopment efforts, he said. The growing firm will move into the second floor of the Smith Bros. Marketplace building, bringing a significant influx of employees to the downtown.

"You'll have more workers downtown generating more traffic for the stores there," Grams said. "Hopefully, other businesses will come downtown with this added traffic."

"Will it happen overnight? Probably not. But in the long term, with the improvements we're making, hopefully we can make a difference."

Following Thursday's public hearing at City Hall, the Plan Commission is expected to make a recommendation on the TIF district borders and plans to the Common Council.

Aldermen are expected to take up the matter when they meet on Tuesday, July 6. The Joint Review Board must then approve the borders and plans before they are submitted to the state for final approval.