Group discusses downtown urbanism plans

By ADRIAN ANGELETTI
Advocate staff writer

The man in charge of implementing a plan to improve downtown Baton Rouge met with people who live there Wednesday night — and he got an earful.

That's just he wanted.

Alexander Garvin, a Yale University professor of urban planning and design for the past 31 years, told the 40 or so residents that he wasn't there to talk, but to listen.

Garvin is the implementation specialist in the consulting team that the city-parish, state and Baton Rouge Area Foundation hired for $450,000 to develop a new urbanism plan for downtown Baton Rouge. The plan should make the area a nicer place to walk, shop, visit and live.

Many of the long-time Baton Rouge residents called on Garvin to restore Third Street to the shopping strip they enjoyed years ago. Others said downtown needs a department store or a discount shopping store, such as Woolworth.

"I cannot promise you Woolworth. They've gone out of business," he joked. Garvin said preliminary plans call for a retail corridor along Third Street.

He said that probably will not include a department store because Maison Blanche is located nearby.

Some of the older residents who now live at the Catholic-Presbyterian Apartments on North Street said they doubted they would ever see any new stores as a result of this plan. Garvin met with residents in a meeting room at those apartments.

"I promise you there will be a new store in Third Street while you're still living here," Garvin said.

Part of downtown revitalization began years ago with the Capitol Complex — a plan to bring more state offices to downtown Baton Rouge. New office buildings will house about 3,000 state workers by 2003.

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Susan Jetton, a Spanish Town resident, said she's pleased to know the state workers will rent property in the neighborhood and become part of the community.
At the same time, she said, she’s concerned about the traffic through that part of downtown. Jetton also said she’s worried that the state won’t stop with the three buildings now planned.

“I’m worried that the state is not through with its encroachment into Spanish Town,” Jetton said. Although the Foster administration has no plans to build more office buildings, she said that can quickly change.

“Their promises are as good as each administration,” Jetton said.

Garvin also talked to residents about the ease of getting financing to buy their homes and about the bureaucratic hassles they may have encountered when they wanted to work on their homes.

Downtown areas typically have small lots and that creates problems for residents. One resident, attorney Allen Kirkpatrick, told Garvin about his problems when trying to finance the purchase and renovation of his home because it is one of two that sit on a single lot.

Garvin urged the residents to voice their wishes and concerns at a “charrette” at the end of June.

The charrette is described as an intense, week-long series of public meetings and discussions from June 26 through July 2. Consultants will have a plan for residents to review at the end of the final charrette meeting, he said.

Garvin’s experience with urban planning goes beyond his work at Yale. He is a New York City planning commissioner, and has worked as deputy commissioner of housing and director of comprehensive planning for that city.

Proponents of the new urbanism concept of urban revitalization have said that without a sound implementation plan, this study is destined to do nothing more than collects dust in some city-parish office.

In his book, The American City, Garvin says that even the most comprehensive plan is useless unless all sectors of the community enthusiastically back it and strive to make it work. Garvin also warned that no plan can change human nature and “is therefore not a panacea for all urban ills,” such as crime and poverty.

The Baton Rouge Area Foundation launched efforts to create a new urbanism plan for downtown Baton Rouge in a series of private meetings earlier this year.

New urbanism backers blame suburban sprawl for some of society’s major problems, including congestion on major traffic arteries and a diminished sense of community among residents who live in cities.

The foundation selected Duany Plater-Zyberk of Miami to lead the consulting team that will develop the plan. Foundation leaders then persuaded the city-parish and state to each match the foundation’s $150,000 pledge to hire consultants.

The $450,000 contract also covers the cost of a local liaison, Boo Thomas, who is responsible for organizing events and providing information to the consultants during the planning process.

The final new urbanism plan for downtown Baton Rouge must be adopted by the Metro Council before going into effect.

Thomas and others involved with the process have said they expect a final plan will be presented to the Metro Council by the end of the year.