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In search of revitalization

Business leaders want to spruce up 16th St. Mall area

By Janet Forgrieve, Rocky Mountain News
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Don't be surprised to see a few more Denver cops afoot in certain downtown spots in the coming months.

Adding foot patrols is the first step toward "revitalizing the core" of the city, says a Downtown Denver Partnership task force charged with recommending ways to spruce up the area on and around the 16th Street Mall.

The group is headed by heavy-hitting business leaders including Qwest Communications CEO Dick Notebaert and Molson Coors chief Leo Kiely.

Don Hunt, a downtown resident and retired business owner, is a co-chairman of the group.

"A couple of ideas have been discussed so far, mostly to do with safety and police presence, as well as some strategies to getting (property) owners to participate in redevelopment," he said.

The biggest problem he sees is one talked about for years: property owners who let their retail storefronts and commercial space sit vacant and decaying.

Hunt cited the Fontius Shoe Co. and Republic Hotel buildings as the two most prominent examples but said there are more.

"There are some absentee owners, like the family owners of parking lots, people that are maybe holding the property for the long, long term and don't necessarily see their role as making downtown a more successful place," he said.

The city already has responded to a task force concern with an experiment that adds an unspecified number of cops walking the beat downtown, said Kelly Brough, a task force member and chief of staff to Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper.

For many on the committee, which held its first meeting last month, that's a baby step. All solutions, including potentially taking property through eminent domain proceedings, could be included in the task force's final recommendations, Hunt said.

Tracy Huggins, a board member and executive director of the Denver Urban Renewal Authority, said the group initially has identified what it sees as downtown's key problems, among them long-empty retail space and the perception of security issues at some spots on the mall. While possible solutions have been discussed, she said nobody has pushed a proposal for taking private property through eminent domain, a last resort that's only been used three times out of 33 DURA projects.

"From time to time, you do hear community-based frustration about the state of some buildings downtown," Huggins said. "People are wanting some kind of redevelopment pursued. There's not been any type of formal proposal brought forward, but it's fair to say a lot of us, me included, would like to see all the buildings downtown contributing."

Joe Vostrejs, manager of Larimer Square and a task force member, takes a harder line.

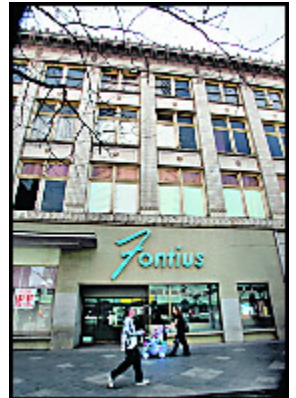
"The Fontius building has been sitting there vacant for 20 years," he said. "That is nonsense - it's totally unacceptable and there's no excuse for it."

A combination of enforcing existing laws and creating new ordinances that force property owners to clean up may be the answer, he said.

Outgoing Denver City Councilwoman Elbra Wedgeworth said she sees a need for the task force - and also expects the group to face frustration with some property owners.

When she met with Gary Cook, whose family owns the Fontius building, "it was like talking to air," she said. She said he figured he could get a higher price for the building in the future, so he was unwilling to sell or improve it.

Cook did not return calls for comment Wednesday.



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The Rocky

The Fontius Shoe Co. is one of the vacant buildings along the 16th Street Mall cited Wednesday as a problem by a task force that is considering ways to improve the mall and surrounding area.

None of the task force members said the impetus behind the committee is the fact the Democrats will hold their presidential convention here next year. But all agreed that when that spotlight shines, Denver should look its best.

Meanwhile, some hope for bigger changes in the years to come.

"On my personal wish list is for a really hard, critical look at the 16th Street Mall," Vostrejs said. "I think there are fundamental structural flaws in the concept."

Wide islands in the center of the strip invite vagrants, loitering and crime, he said, while the mall shuttle acts as a "free above-ground subway" that keeps traffic on one street.

That fact creates the perception that the panhandling situation is worse than it is, said Richard Scharf, a task force member and head of the Denver Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau.

"Most cities have 20-by-30 block areas where people (go)," Scharf said. "Ours has the 1-by-12 block area called the 16th Street Mall, so I think the perception is greater. If you're hit up once per block, you're hit up 12 times, and people think we have a bigger problem."

Key issues for the task force

- Dealing with long- vacant, rundown retail properties
- Addressing security and safety perceptions on 16th Street Mall

Task force members

Co-chairs:

- Don Hunt - owner, the Antero Co., a real estate development consulting firm
- Leo Kiely - CEO, Molson Coors Brewing Co.
- Dick Notebaert - CEO, Qwest Communications

Other members:

- John Adams
- Kelly Brough - Mayor John Hickenlooper's chief of staff
- Bill Elfenbein - RTD board
- Buzz Geller - developer
- Tracy Huggins - executive director, Denver Urban Renewal Authority
- Evan Makovsky - developer, real estate investor
- Karen Mulville - general manager, the Pavilions
- Rob Naiman - developer
- John Schafer - Hyatt Regency general manager
- Richard Scharf - CVB
- Ashton Steele - property manager, Crescent Real Estate
- Mike Zoellner - head of RedPeak
- Joe Vostrejs - Larimer Square