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HEADLINE: Business owners' ideas sought for downtown improvements

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The master plan implementation committee is seeking ideas from business owners on ways to improve the downtown.

The committee has sent a survey to downtown business owners and have invited them to a meeting at 7 p.m. Wednesday in the Lincoln Room of town hall.

"Randolph needs a good downtown area to keep the community together and for its pride," said Juan Carlos Serna, chairman of the committee.

"Right now, people don't go to the downtown, they go through it," he said. "You don't see it as a cohesive downtown, you see it as a bunch of different stores lumped together."

The committee is looking at ways to implement the town's four-year-old master plan. Serna said several of the report's recommendations deal with the downtown.

Serna said he hopes the responses to the survey and comments at the meeting will lead to a unified plan for the downtown and include historical properties including Stetson Hall and the Corkin Building.

Some of the recommendations could be for zoning changes that would allow mixed-use developments, he said.

Serna said half the space on the upper floors of downtown buildings is vacant. Allowing the space to be converted into a new use, such as studio apartments, would generate revenue for property owners that could be used for building renovations and not create a significant burden on town services.

"If they can't rent out the top floors, what use is it to have a nice-looking building?" he said.

From the responses and comments he's heard so far, Serna said business property owners don't want to go it alone when it comes to improvements.

"They don't mind putting money into their buildings, but they're not going to do it in isolation," he said.

Other ideas would be burying utility lines and seeking grants for other improvements.

"I've heard a million reasons why it can't be done," Serna said. "That's not the can-do attitude that's needed."

Selectman James Burgess, who is one of the board's liaisons to the master plan committee, said most other communities are more restrictive when it comes to what can be developed in the downtown area.

He said some of the restrictions could be bans or limits on fast-food restaurants, drive-through windows or gas stations.

"Those things that don't bring any residual business to the businesses around them," Burgess said.

A variety of businesses and services is needed for a downtown business district to thrive in spite of changes in the economy.

"If you end up with a downtown that's all one thing, and there is a downturn in the economy, what will you be left with?" he said. "You want to diversify your district as much as you can."

Serna said the committee hopes to come up with its first proposals in time for next year's town meeting. Fred Hanson may be reached at fhanson@ledger.com.

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