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Planners complete study on Algonquin

By JOSEPH BUSTOS - jbustos@shawmedia.com

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ALGONQUIN – Finding ways to market and promote Algonquin’s downtown is one of the main action steps the village should carry out, planners say.

A downtown planning study has been completed and is set to be reviewed by the Village Board next week.

Bridget Lane, the director of Business Districts Inc. and who helped with the downtown planning study, said having a plan helps developers know what the municipality is interested in attracting.

“The plan exists,” Lane said. “That’s what developers look for, a place that says ‘this is what we want’ so they could save money on the front end without having to guess what a community wants. There’s plenty of material with this plan to market the downtown.”

The village should create a downtown planning task force to help market the area and encourage businesses to locate on Main Street, village consultants said.

The task force members could network with their contacts and other developers, and encourage them to come into the village, said Ron Lanz, the principal for Land Vision who helped put the study together.

Other recommendations include re-establishing the Algonquin Downtown Business Group, recruiting destination businesses to locate in the area, and repainting Main Street to allow for bike lanes and pedestrian enhancements.

“This is private-led,” Lanz said. “These are vision pieces that the village may think is appropriate ... but it will all have to happen on its own when the economics support it, and the property and business owners are ready to do so.”

The Downtown Planning Study comes as the Illinois Department of Transportation constructs a western bypass to divert heavy trucks and through traffic from the intersection of Routes 62 and 31. A \$90,000 federal grant from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning paid for the study.

Planners suggested that a re-established downtown business group should be refocused and run by downtown businesses rather than directed by village staff members.

“Let them take charge of it themselves,” Lanz said. “Staff will support, as opposed to staff leading.”

The planners said better support for temporary commercial activities could help fill vacant space for six to eight weeks at a time with seasonal goods. There also should be an effort to find destination businesses, such as children’s dance schools, tutoring and microbreweries, to help bring new people to the downtown who specifically seek out those types of businesses.

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Planners also recommended the village start designing directional and gateway signs for the downtown and evaluate the possibility of having a recreational paddling and white water park.

To help pay for some of these improvements, Algonquin could look into transportation and infrastructure grants, or even into setting up tax increment financing districts or special service area districts, among other things, Lanz said.

A TIF district is not something the village has done traditionally, but it might be an option to consider to be competitive with other municipalities, Lanz said.

"Don't just set one up to set up one," Lanz said. "Make sure you have a developer ready to go."

Planners also recommend keeping the parallel parking on Main Street to encourage pedestrian traffic. Angle-parking spots would require reducing the width of sidewalks, Lanz said.

The village should enhance the informal connections that connect parking lots to buildings on Main Street and connect Towne Park to the river. Also recommended was completing sidewalks from neighborhoods to downtown, and putting in bike lanes in the downtown, said Stacey Meekins, a planner for Sam Schwartz Engineering.

"That's going to calm the traffic, when you put bike lanes on the streets and narrow ... the space for cars. It slows cars down," Meekins said. "It's also going to provide connection to existing facilities to the north ... and primarily the [bike] path."

View the study

To see the study results, visit www.landvision.com/algonquindowntownplan