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Shane Opatz photo / Revitalizing downtown Menomonie could include many facets, ranging from increasing bicycle and pedestrian traffic to attracting new businesses to developing the city's arts scene. Residents discussed those ideas during meetings Tuesday.

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Public weighs in on Menomonie downtown revitalization

By Pamela Powers

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MENOMONIE — Efforts to revitalize downtown Menomonie could receive a boost by increasing two-wheeled and foot traffic without more four-wheeled vehicles.

That sentiment gained traction during two community meetings Tuesday designed to gather residents' ideas and hopes for downtown.

"We need more businesses," city Councilman Patrick Soviak said. "More traffic means more businesses."

Attendees developed ideas on the issues facing downtown, what needs to change and what should be retained. Participants also were asked what downtown problem most needs to be solved.

The meetings were sponsored by the Mixed Use Redevelopment Strategy Steering Group — which comprises city, county, and UW-Stout officials and downtown business owners — in an effort to develop a plan to revitalize downtown.

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The group started as an initiative of UW-Stout Chancellor Charles Sorensen in March. It began after interest grew in developing mixed-use housing and business space at the site of the former Leever's Foods, dubbed the Gateway Project, which was approved earlier this year by the City Council.

In addition to increasing bicycle and pedestrian traffic, meeting participants came up with other ideas for downtown, such as developing microbusinesses, transforming large retail spaces into smaller ones and erecting a bakery.

"We wanted to meet a need in the community not being met," said Menomonie school district Superintendent Chris Stratton, who led one group.

Helping attract more UW-Stout students downtown also would help revitalize the area, participants said. One idea is to have students take part in service projects downtown to promote a stronger attachment to the area.

Still other ideas were to emphasize downtown's architectural history, provide walking areas and create a children's museum.

City officials hired LHB of Minneapolis at a cost not to exceed \$109,000 to recommend ways to revitalize downtown. That cost is being paid for by redevelopment group members.

LHB is surveying downtown visitors to gather more input for renovation efforts.

Michael Schroeder, LHB's director of urban design and planning, said the firm is scheduled to make its final recommendations in early 2011. He noted a desire to change attitudes about downtown, making it a source of city pride.

"When I hear that, it tells me there are people committed to downtown," Schroeder said.

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