

The Aegis

## State unveils plans for improved Aberdeen train station

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The Maryland Department of Transportation has big plans for a greener, more vibrant neighborhood around the Aberdeen train station, although, as it became clear during Thursday evening's public presentation, those plans are still a long way from becoming reality.

Transit officials took the first step by unveiling the transit-oriented development master plan for Aberdeen: a "greenway" network that includes a tree-lined boulevard and park space; a stepped, amphitheater-type area to serve as a crossing between Bel Air Avenue and the station instead of the current, gritty-looking walkway; and greater activity around the Festival Park area.

The design also features three major land-use "squares," where development would be targeted: the station square east of Route 40, with park and commercial uses; the festival square around Festival Park, with civic mixed use and commercial uses; and the residential square south of West Bel Air Avenue, with largely residential and some park and commercial use.

James Peiffer, development services group manager for MDOT, suggested small steps the city could take in the meantime, such as programs for bike paths or activities that generate excitement, such as farmers markets.

Aberdeen recently launched an Amish farmers market in Festival Park on Fridays that Mayor Mike Bennett said has been, despite being very small, very successful.

"Even with these kinds of baby steps, you begin to develop a momentum, an image of the place. It begins to become more attractive to investors," Peiffer told the city council. "I think it's better if you begin laying the foundation."

Peiffer suggested the city create an advisory group to consider ways of taking advantage of activities the city already has.

He also offered to make a similar presentation to the Harford County Council. Bennett said he has already spoken with County Councilman Dick Slutzky, who was at Thursday's meeting.

"They're a partner in this so I think we want them to continue to be a partner," Bennett said.

MDOT plans to complete its report within the next month.

City council members said they hope the new vision generates some new excitement about Aberdeen's possibilities.

Councilwoman Sandra Landbeck noted the vision will require city officials to acquire land and look at Aberdeen's zoning.

"That is the very first thing we will need to start doing," Landbeck said. "We recognize that it will take several years."

Councilwoman Ruth Ann Young was optimistic about the process.

"I am encouraged and I am enthused about where we are at this point," she said. "I am looking for a positive domino effect that things will proceed. I do see that it is a way for us to renew our downtown and I strongly feel that that is badly needed."

Bennett called it "pretty awesome" that MDOT officials and the city's planning department, led by Phyllis Grover, packed the room for Thursday's presentation.

"I know that we've gotten [Slutzky's] attention and I know as an Aberdeen resident, he feels some of the excitement we're feeling," Bennett said, adding it is just one example of the city's growth.

"Aberdeen is becoming known as the job center of the county," he said. "I'm excited and I think we're moving along very nicely...Someday we'll be able to sit back and say 'I was a part of that.'"

Bennett said after the meeting that he was especially excited about the plan for a new crossing over Route 40.

"It will be nice and open and airy, and not a claustrophobic tunnel," he said. "It's just going to create that sense of community."

No plans about funding or other practicalities were presented.

Bennett pointed out the city did just receive a AA bond rating from Standard and Poor's and Fitch, showing Aberdeen is on solid financial footing.

"We are in excellent financial shape in the city," he said.

Nevertheless, he said nothing was expected to materialize with the new vision for at least a little while.

"Within several years, we will be able to get things together," he said. "We will have to look at the whole picture and see what's the low-hanging fruit here."

Bennett said the greenway concept, such as planting trees along Route 40 and giving it more of a boulevard look, was the likeliest scenario.

"You create that park-like atmosphere and it's more of a sense of community."