

Panel offers ideas to “spruce up” Burlington

By Gina Cole

@Gina_SVH | Posted: Friday, May 3, 2013 7:00 am

BURLINGTON — Burlington may be the county’s biggest sales tax base, thanks to malls and big -box stores, but it still lacks a distinctive identity that makes people want to get off the freeway and shop there.

This was the word from members of Burlington’s Technical Assistance Panel, tasked by the city with finding ways that Burlington can improve its planning and infrastructure. The group presented its findings and recommendations Thursday afternoon.

The panel, along with professors and graduate students from the University of Washington’s Green Futures Lab, used residents’ ideas and “wish lists” from a forum held by the city last month to make recommendations.

“Burlington Boulevard, when you drive by, it should turn your head and make you happy, because from the Skagit River to the time they pass you by is about 14 seconds,” said panelist Jon Rose, president of Olympic Property Group. For the panel, Rose analyzed housing and commercial development. “...I very quickly pass through your downtown without knowing I’ve been through it.”

Adding more signs, trees, benches, and new paint and awnings downtown could help alleviate that, said panelist Beth Dwyer, principal at GGLO, a Seattle-based integrated design firm.

The goal is to create a consistent welcoming feel without spending a lot of money, she said. The panel suggested that some money from the “cash machine” of the retail core go right back into sprucing up that area.

Rose said Burlington’s residential areas also could use more of an identity. Instilling neighborhood pride makes people more willing to put down roots, reinvesting in their homes and their community, he said.

“It’s really important for humans to have that habitat that says, ‘This is home,’” he said. “People don’t choose to live in housing. They choose to live in neighborhoods.”

People also like to have a community gathering place, identifying a few plots of land the city could consider buying to create one, including next to the newly built Visitors Center, the panel said.

Tree- or shrub-lined paths near Gages Slough would make Burlington more walkable and bikeable, panelists said.

Now that the panel has made its recommendations, the city must decide what to do with them.

“We cannot profess to understand your community,” said panel chair Matt Anderson, principal at Heartland, a Seattle-based real estate consulting and development firm. “We’ve enjoyed it a great deal, but this is really your town and your plan.”

Mayor Steve Sexton said he’s glad to have the plan.

“We’re in a unique position with our sales tax base what it is,” Sexton told the panel. “We can’t count on that forever, so we need to act now... Your timing is perfect.”

— *Reporter Gina Cole: 360-416-2148, gcole@skagitpublishing.com, Twitter: @Gina_SVH, facebook.com/byGinaCole*