

Pedestrian, bike safety on wish list

Affordable housing also ranks high for 2015 during City Council retreat

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ASHEVILLE — Making more ways for people to safely walk and bike across the city was a common goal among groups at City Council's annual retreat on Friday.

City leaders reflected the desire for multimodal transportation in laying out their goals for 2015. Nearly all mentioned it, or indicated they agreed with it.

Affordable housing was also one of the top concerns among council and residents, with a call to add \$100,000 to the city's affordable housing trust fund.

Councilman Chris Pelly said the city's current rate of building two miles of new sidewalk a year against a deficit of 108 miles set in 2005 is not enough. It would take 50 years to complete the work at that rate, he said.

"If not now, then when are we going to address this backlog of needed sidewalk linkages in the city," he said.

Multimodal improvements, like sidewalks, crosswalks and bike lanes, were mentioned in each of the three breakout groups made up of council members and city residents during the retreat.

The issue has been a critical one across Asheville. A 67-year-old woman was killed recently while trying to cross Merrimon Avenue at Coleman Avenue. A group from the Five Points neighborhood rallied at the intersection on Jan. 24 to get support for a crossing signal there.

City Council members offered their priorities after the breakout sessions with residents.

Here's a look some of them:

» Pelly, who raised the slow sidewalk construction rate, said he wants it increased to five miles a year and wants \$500,000 spent annually on neighborhood sidewalks. He also wants the city to look at getting a leaf pickup truck.

» Jan Davis wants more collaboration with the state Department of Transportation. He also wants more downtown parking. "That's got to be a big issue," he said. "The people here in the downtown seem to feel a little neglected with the riverfront (development) happening." More police visibility downtown and more street lights are also among his priorities.

» Vice Mayor Marc Hunt said City Council needs to step back and sort through its development goals to come up with a common language to use in making growth decisions. He said now the decisions are sometimes emotional and made individually. He also said the improvement plan underway at the police department is important but worries the public doesn't have a good understanding of the department's problems.

» Cecil Bothwell said Asheville needs to remember that tourists are critical to the economy. "The reason we succeed as a city is largely because we are an attractive city." He said that's because the city has one of the best-preserved downtowns in the nation. Architectural review regulations need to be tweaked, he said, to make sure new buildings fit in. He wants to fix what he called pockets of bad zoning and wants to end conditional use zoning because it is unfair to neighbors. He also wants to raise parking rates to create more spaces downtown.

» Gordon Smith said the city's land use and development plans need to be modernized to create growth that is good for the entire community. "If that growth is reserved for the privileged, we will have failed," he said. He wants another \$100,000 for the city's affordable housing trust fund and supports revitalizing the Lee Walker Heights public housing complex. He also wants to see more city government data made open to the public.

» Gwen Wisler wants to tie multimodal transportation to city land use policies. She also wants selection of the new police chief to be an open process with community input and wants the city to try "getting to a better place" with the Civil Service Board. The board hears employee grievances among other duties. Police Chief William Anderson retired last month amid morale problems and a state standards investigation.

» Mayor Esther Manheimer said she would continue to lead on collaborations and partnerships, which she said are critical if the city wants to achieve its goals. She regularly meets with mayors throughout Buncombe County and leaders in surrounding counties along with mayors of other North Carolina cities, she said. She cited Duke Energy's partnership with the city to revitalize Lee Walker Heights as an example of an important collaboration.

The discussion on Friday at the U.S. Cellular Center banquet hall mirrored an informal discussion among city residents Thursday on a Facebook page devoted to city politics.

Affordable housing was mentioned in six of the 41 posts on the page by Friday. After that, nonvehicle transportation like sidewalks, crosswalks and bike lanes, and wages dominated the discussion.

City staff will take the ideas on Friday and update the city's long range plan. The update could ready in a matter of weeks.

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COUNCILMAN