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Resurrecting Basalt: Town's big-bang plan will sculpt future of 5 properties



Residents who took the opportunity to get involved in the Our Town planning process get to work with a blank slate to plot the uses of five key parcels ear downtown. The properties are blanked out on the aerial map.



Basalt's downtown charm and character make it an attractive place, but it has struggled to recover from the recession.

Basalt's pieces of the puzzle

Basalt residents are planning potential future uses on five key parcels on the west side of the

downtown commercial core. Those properties are:

- Pan and Fork Mobile Home Park, 5.28 acres — It is the western-most of the five properties. The town government owns half of the property and is converting it into a park alongside the Roaring Fork River. The nonprofit Roaring Fork Community Development Corp. owns the other half.
- The former recycling center — The town-owned, pie-shaped parcel was decommissioned earlier this year as the recycle center. Butch's Lobster shack will take up residence there for the summer.
- Lions Park, 3.21 acres, including the recycling center pie wedge — The park is currently occupied by Town Hall, the Basalt Chamber of Commerce's little red caboose and the Wyly Community Arts Center.
- The Phillips 66 gas station, .15 acres — Four Corners Properties LLC and managing partner Mike Solondz purchased the property out of foreclosure in October.
- Clark's Market building, roughly 1.4 acres — Clark's Market will vacate the building in June that many residents see as a centerpiece of improving Basalt. The building is located just south of Midland Avenue. Frank Taverna has owned it for 31 years.

— Scott Condon

Editor's note: This is the first part in a three-part series about Basalt's Our Town effort to plan the future of the downtown. Today's article looks at the five properties involved in the unique planning process. Thursday's article looks at who is participating in the process. Friday's article takes a sample of opinions.

Consider it Basalt's Big Bang Theory.

Hundreds of people of all ages and political persuasions are participating in a process designed to determine future uses on five key parcels in the town. This isn't a run-of-the-mill master-planning drill that will produce general guidelines for developers to aspire to — or ignore. The people will come up with site-specific plans, which the town has committed to endorse. Developers will then assess if they can deliver what the people want.

"You never get buy-in from the public if you start with the developers," said Town Manager Mike Scanlon.

The effort was partially born out of frustration of many residents and business leaders over downtown's economic doldrums. Many people feel that Basalt's economic focus shifted to Willits Town Center when Whole Foods opened in August 2012.

Scanlon and key members of his staff organized a process they hope will be a blueprint for recharging vitality in the commercial core without destroying Basalt's small-town charm and historic character.

The organizers refused to think small. They are looking at five closely located and somewhat integrated parcels.

Started with Pan and Fork

Town residents already were debating future use of one of the parcels, the former Pan and Fork Mobile Home Park site. An opportunity was seized to include four other properties in one big bang of a planning process.

The town government and the nonprofit Roaring Fork Community Development Corp. bought the 5.28-acre Pan and Fork property for \$3.25 million in August 2011. The town plans to convert its portion into a park alongside the Roaring Fork River. Community Development Corp. retains 2.3 acres that are zoned commercial.

The town government helped residents of the 37 trailers relocate, and Community Development Corp. started the debate about future uses when it submitted an application for a hotel and accompanying commercial space.

The review bogged down, but Scanlon and his staff saw an opportunity for a broader discussion. What if town-owned property across Two Rivers Road could be thrown into the potential development mix? Would that relieve pressure to cram as much development as possible on the Pan and Fork?

It didn't stop there. Scanlon engaged the owners of the Clark's Market building and, to a lesser extent, the owners of the Phillips 66 to allow their private properties to be included in the process.

Getting Clark's Market building owner Frank Taverna to buy into the process was critical, Scanlon said, because the property is in the middle of the commercial core.

"We had to get permission to white-out his building," Scanlon said.

Blank slate for citizen planners

That's exactly what happened in the planning process. The town is using a map with an aerial view of Basalt for the planning. Each of the five key parcels is whited out on the map. Participants are given a blank slate from which to build a kingdom.

The project was dubbed the Our Town planning process.

The work of hundreds of residents will be examined for common themes later this month and in June and then condensed into a plan. The question is: Will the property owners and prospective developers buy into the plan?

"We are definitely interested in seeing what this community decision comes to," said Michael McVoy, president of Community Development Corp., owner of half of the Pan and Fork site. "We're in a waiting game to see where the discussion leads."

McVoy sees the process as a possible “watershed” event that redefines how the town government works with developers for the benefit of all.

“Basalt has a history of turning projects down,” McVoy said. And the reviews have been lengthy in the past.

This process will take the guessing out of it for the developers and, in theory, expedite the review for those who follow the community’s blueprint.

McVoy and other representatives of Community Development Corp. haven’t gotten involved in the planning process because they don’t want to influence the expectations for the Pan and Fork site. Some of the citizen planners envision the property kept entirely open as parkland. Others believe it is ideal for development. Some see a mix.

Community Development Corp. saw development of its portion as a way to recoup the funds it invested to buy and work on the plan for the property. Any profit will likely go into some civic cause, potentially building affordable office space for nonprofit organizations, McVoy said. But the organization wouldn’t object if town residents want the entire riverfront property preserved as a park.

“If the town wants it as a park, they’re going to have to step forward and pay the value,” McVoy said.

Building owner bullish on Basalt

Like McVoy, Taverna is eager to see where the planning process leads. He said he feels there has been too much doom and gloom expressed about the fate of downtown.

“I really see it as a bright spot,” Taverna said. “Downtown Basalt is always going to be a bright spot.”

The Rocky Mountain Institute’s construction of an office building and Innovation Center to showcase energy-efficient design and construction will “really be a shot in the arm,” he said.

Less clear is the future of the building that he has owned for 31 years. Clark’s Market will vacate the space it has leased for 15 years in June, leaving several thousand square feet of empty commercial space close to downtown. Taverna and a partner also own the spaces facing Midland Avenue, including the Jimbo’s Liquor space and the former site of Roaring Fork Anglers.

Taverna said he and his partner are working on some ideas that he cannot divulge yet for uses of the supermarket space. The site has been identified in the planning process as a great location for Trader Joe’s, a supermarket chain similar to Whole Foods Market.

“I think all of us would like to see a Trader Joe’s,” Taverna said.

Representatives of the supermarket have said they aren’t ready to expand yet to the mountains.

Many of the hundreds of plans submitted to the Our Town process call for Taverna’s building to be

razed and replaced with limited redevelopment.

“The property is not for sale,” Taverna said while making it clear he is optimistic about the uses of the existing structure.

Basalt is going through changes that were spurred by the recession, Taverna said. He thinks downtown will be fine in the long run, but it will require patience to deal with bumps in the road in the next few years. Ultimately, he believes downtown’s charm will help it emerge from the tough times.

“There are a lot of small towns in America that would die for Midland Avenue,” Taverna said.

McVoy said he thinks it will be difficult for one developer to gain control of all of Basalt’s downtown puzzle pieces. They will likely be developed independently, he said.

“The Pan and Fork is first,” McVoy said. “It’s the only one that’s empty.”

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