

Public gives direction on future of downtown

(<http://www.pioneerlocal.com/westernsprings/news/2000745,western-springs-survey-012110-s1.article>)

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A book store, gift and card shop and a specialty prepared foods store topped the list of prospective businesses Western Springs residents would patronize in their downtown, according to a survey from December.

Results of the survey were presented Jan. 13 at the first of three community meetings to gather input on crafting a downtown redevelopment plan, guided by Teska Associates, Inc., consultants based in Plainfield and Evanston.

Up to 84 percent of the 619 respondents said they would spend "a little more" to "a lot more" in the village's downtown if a casual dining restaurant opened. In separate questions, another 68 percent would spend more on a counter service restaurant; 53 percent would frequent a bar or club; 52 percent favored a quick-serve eatery; and 51 percent would patronize a fine dining establishment with white tablecloths.

By the numbers

Of those responding to the survey, 24 percent spend \$25 to \$50 a week on meals outside the home and another 21 percent spent \$50 to \$75 dining or carrying out.

On the types of stores suggested, 67 percent of respondents would be drawn downtown to spend more in a new bookstore; 66 percent favored a card and gift shop; and 64 percent looked forward to a specialty prepared foods store.

In addition, 54 percent said they would spend more downtown at an organic green grocer; 51 percent at a pharmacy; 56 percent at a shoe store; 53 percent at a gardening supplies store; 56 percent at a home accessories store; and 53 percent at a women's apparel store.

Respondents gave Western Springs high marks on safety with 35 percent rating the village as excellent and 46 percent as above average. Above average to excellent ratings also were given by 77 percent on the friendliness of downtown business employees and 81 percent on cleanliness of streets and sidewalks.

Those taking the survey were least satisfied with the variety of good available with 45 percent rating choices as below average or awful, followed by 20 percent dissatisfied with traffic flow and store hours.

Good response

Mike Hoffman, project manager for Teska, said he was pleased more than 600 residents responded to the survey online, which also was offered in a paper version and was completed by 85 nonresidents who frequent the downtown.

"The things we would like to see happening in a downtown are happening," Hoffman said, referring to the survey's favorable response on friendly, knowledgeable employees at downtown businesses.

"People are getting better service in downtown Western Springs than at other places, and that's what a downtown needs to do," he said.

Parking isn't an issue now, but it could be as vacancies are filled and additional projects are built once the economy improves, he said.

Another component of the redevelopment plan will be discussed by the Village Board in the near future. Teska mapped out a tour and compared Western Springs with the downtowns of Wheaton, Glen Ellyn, Downers Grove, Westmont, Clarendon Hills, Hinsdale and La Grange.

Hoffman said he expects to present a more detailed analysis of the survey to the Western Springs Business Association in early February.

Now what?

Joe Lane, association president, said he hasn't yet reviewed the survey but has high hopes of positive results for the downtown from the planning process, unlike past efforts where little changed.

"It's exciting. They're doing this one right," Lane said.

About 60 residents attended the Jan. 13 meeting, said Martin Scott, community development director. After hearing a presentation on the survey and the planning process, residents broke into small groups to brainstorm ideas.

"It went very well. It's different than in the past because it's very interactive," Scott said. "The trend is to get more input from residents and business owners."

The second community meeting will be held at 7 p.m. Feb. 10 at the Village Club, 4221 Lawn Ave.

"This will be a visual preference survey with a lot of different pictures on streetscapes, signage and architecture," Hoffman said. "People will vote on images almost like a game show and we'll rank and evaluate the different images they see."

Those in attendance will be using clickers, hand-held devices to instantly register preferences, which can be compiled and presented in seconds, he said.

"We'll go back and talk about the ones people rated highly or poorly so we get a good understanding of what people want in the downtown."

Survey results, other reports and a blog to comment on the planning process is available at www.teskaassociates.com/westernsprings/index.html.

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