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# Downtown

## City visioning goes ‘outside the box’

By [Evan Tuchinsky](#)

Take a stroll around Chico’s downtown. What do you see? Shops, galleries, restaurants, bars and trees pop out. But look closer: There are offices and residences, too. Now look critically: There are parking meters, some vacant storefronts and juxtaposed architecture.

Honing the eye of the citizenry was a main aim of the Downtown Chico Visioning Workshop at the Arroyo Room Tuesday night (March 25). Actually, the Arroyo Room was just the gathering point—city planners and consultants made a walking tour the centerpiece of the workshop, one in a series organized as part of the process to update Chico’s general plan.

About 70 people came at 6 p.m., and 54 stuck around to give their opinions in a live poll that wrapped just after 9. Attendees included Mayor Andy Holcombe; Vice Mayor Ann Schwab; City Councilmembers Tom Nickell and Mary Flynn; former Planning Commissioners Steve O’Bryan and Kirk Monfort (the latter now part of the General Plan Advisory Committee); and school board President Jann Reed. Businesspeople, residents, students and Chico State faculty also participated.

The findings ranged from obvious—people don’t want the “heart of Chico” clogged by big-box stores—to surprising.

“There was more willingness to accept national retailers and a full range of housing types, and less concern about parking than I expected,” Planning Director Steve Peterson said afterward. He came away certain of how much people “really care about downtown and have excellent ideas about what uses it should have,” as well as some statistical data about functional and aesthetic preferences.

City Manager Dave Burkland valued the chance to “look at downtown from a different perspective. I’m happy people will step back and engage in further discussion.”

Indeed, this session was just the first on downtown and intended to get people thinking “outside the box.”

**In order to get outside the box**, people needed to get outside the building. Thus, Peterson’s staff organized the tour.

Attendees reached under their seats and found yellow Post-It notes identifying five groups: local developers,



### BEST USE OF THE SPACE?

Participants in the Downtown Chico Visioning Workshop looked critically at six sites, including this creekside building and parking lot on East First Avenue. Ideas for possible redevelopment included a mixed-use multistory building with restaurants and housing, as well as a riverwalk.

Photo By Evan Tuchinsky

property owners, decision makers, Chico residents and CSU students. Each headed out to look over six sites:

- The single-story office building in the midst of parking spaces on creekside property along East First Street.
- Another city parking lot, on East Second and Flume—site of the Saturday Farmers Market.
- The Thunderbird Lodge property on Main and East Seventh.
- The Jack in the Box on Broadway, catty-corner from City Plaza.
- The Bank of America on Broadway, across from City Plaza.
- The office building occupied by PG&E and the Chico Chamber of Commerce, on Salem Street between West Third and West Fourth.

Peterson instructed the participants to role-play while checking out the properties. “Developers” would look at the potential for new buildings and projects, for instance; “students” would vouch for their own needs. Based on the follow-up reports, only the “students” really took to the part; other groups featured a few good actors and many people playing themselves.

A few common themes emerged.

- Parking lots and single-tenant lots represent an opportunity cost that mixed-use, multistory buildings could address—though maybe not on the Farmers Market lot, which some participants like as-is and others envision as a possible covered marketplace a la Seattle’s Pike Street Market or Baltimore’s Lexington Market.
- The Thunderbird Lodge sign is historic and worth preserving; the motel, not so much (though attendees learned its new owners are planning a facelift, pending approval by the city’s Architectural Review Board).
- The bank, fast-food joint and low-riding office buildings aren’t too pleasing to look at, either.
- Transitions are important—from neighboring residences to the downtown core, from the north side of downtown to the south, from the creekside greenway into Annie’s Glen and Lower Bidwell Park.
- The city should offer regulatory support (i.e. rezoning) more than financial, though certain places are so important that redevelopment money might be in order.

**The live polling brought out some controversial** opinions, though the workshop attendees seemed to take them in stride. Apart from a few gasps, no vocal reactions echoed through the ballroom.

The baited-breath inquiries centered on parking, and the hotly debated structure proposed (and thwarted) for the Second-and-Flume lot.

*Is there enough parking downtown?* Sixty-one percent voted yes, compared with 30 percent no.

*Do you have difficulty parking downtown?* Forty-five percent no, 24 percent sometimes, 20 percent yes.

*Does downtown currently need another parking structure?* Sixty-eight percent no, 24 percent yes.

Other questions focused on what people like about downtown (its proximity to work, the shopping), what downtown needs (more residences and outdoor dining) and what retail chains would be acceptable additions (no to big boxes; yes to upscale niches).

Planners took it all in.

Peterson said the next downtown workshop will be more focused and will reflect what worked well (and what didn’t) Tuesday night.

“The city is really committed to getting different responses,” Peterson said. “This is not window dressing. We’re not going through a formula or going through the plan we’re going to write. This is genuine. Look at the totality of the effort.”