Meeting mines ideas for West Pasco waterfront

By Laura Kinsler

NEW PORT RICHEY — Pasco County has won all kinds of awards for its Harbors Plan to redevelop the county’s waterfront and U.S.19 corridor. But for now, it’s just a plan. The real challenge is putting ideas into action. That’s what Thursday’s all-day brainstorming session was about.

The county won a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to bring in two experts from Smart Growth America to help the county and cities of Port Richey and New Port Richey develop a plan for implementing the Harbors vision.

“It’s important not to be purely theoretical,” Smart Growth’s John Robert Smith said. “You have to know you can do it.”

Smith, a former pharmacist and small-town mayor, said New Port Richey has great potential for redevelopment because the city was developed in a grid pattern, which lends itself to being the type of “walkable” community that attracts baby boomers and millennials.

Millennials — people in their 20s and 30s — are buying fewer cars and waiting longer to get their driver’s licenses than their parents’ and grandparents’ generations. Many of them would rather use transit or a car-sharing service than deal with owning a car.

“We went to get our license as soon as we could because it was how we socialized,” Smith said. “They don’t have to do that anymore — they have (smartphones).”

City and county officials, and a few members of the public, offered dozens of suggestions for reinvigorating the downtown area. Peter Altman, New Port Richey’s finance director, wanted to focus on building a huge tourist attraction — a man-made whitewater course through downtown. “What we need is a home run — a wow project,” he said. Others offered more modest goals, such as rewriting the city’s zoning rules to allow for more creative uses, improving parking or using water taxis to connect downtown with Millers Bayou.

Smart Growth Vice President Chris Zimmerman said he and Smith would compile all the suggestions into a final report, along with their recommendations, in a few weeks.

“We need to walk out of here with an action plan that won’t sit on a shelf,” economic development planner Melanie Kendrick said.
U.S. 19 redevelopment a long-term pursuit for Pasco

Rich Shopes, Times Staff Writer

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PORT RICHEY — Lacy Herman lucked out with two blouses for $18 thanks to JCPenney's close-out sale last week, but don't count the 23-year-old University of South Florida student among U.S. 19's regular shoppers.

She prefers the Shops at Wiregrass and Westfield Countryside Mall.

"It doesn't have the stores I like," she said, explaining she went to Penney's at Gulf View Square Mall only because it was closing.

As Pasco County officials mull landscaping choices, traffic patterns and plenty of other options in a bid to spruce up the busy corridor, one question hovers over the rest: How to lure young shoppers like Herman?

Destinations like Citrus Park Mall in west Hillsborough, International Plaza in Tampa and Wesley Chapel's Shops at Wiregrass all compete with U.S. 19. And there recently came word of a 333-acre outdoor mall and movie theater planned in Trinity, adding to the competition.

The county welcomes the proposed center, but the new development and others like it are making the job of redeveloping U.S. 19 that much harder.

While a third of Pasco residents live in west Pasco close to the busy corridor, the area's aging, retiree demographic makes it a tough sell to retailers favored by 20- and 30-somethings.

Further, retail experts say that as west Pasco gets grayer and dollar stores and other discount retailers stake more territory on the corridor, that fight will only get more lopsided.

"Retirees are generally on fixed incomes and there's not a lot of opportunities for retailers to grow in areas that look like that," said John Fleming of the Florida Retail Federation.

Not ideal population

It's not all bad news for U.S. 19. The highway remains west Pasco's busiest commercial stretch, with about 60,000 vehicles daily and 20,000 jobs. The area accounts for about a third of Pasco's tax base. Retailers Ulta Beauty and TJ Maxx recently opened at Gulf View Square, and appliance retailer H.H. Gregg and Panera Bread have both opened nearby on U.S. 19.

But even if business is bustling, the area's demographics don't bode well for the future.

County demographers say 24 percent of the population west of Little Road is 65 and older, and 60 to 70 percent of residents there have low to moderate income. Of the area's 90,000-plus housing units, more than 20,000 are vacant.
That compares to 2,000 of Wesley Chapel’s 17,000 housing units sitting empty and a 65-and-older population of 9 percent. Plus, median household income there exceeds $74,000 yearly.

Given the differences, it’s no wonder retailers wanting a young, upscale customer base are turning to Wesley Chapel, Trinity and New Tampa.

"It’s a chicken and egg problem," said Steve Kirn, executive director of the Miller Center for Retailing Education and Research at the University of Florida. "Retailers can’t afford to open a store and wait around for customers to come to them. The customers have to be there."

Put another way, because young families gravitate to areas with other young families, U.S. 19 and the neighborhoods around it are being skipped over. And because retailers love young shoppers — especially upwardly mobile ones who can be cultivated into loyal brand followers — they’re flocking to those areas, as well.

How this translates to consumers like Herman is plain: She isn’t likely to frequent U.S. 19 anytime soon. She shops there now two or three times a year.

"It’s so run-down looking. It's gross," she said.

**Enacting reform**

Matt Armstrong is among Pasco’s team of planners tasked with sprucing up the highway. The job remains one of the county’s long-term priorities.

In April, it hired Florida State University to gather data to implement a massive redevelopment plan devised last year called the Harbors West Market Redevelopment/Infill plan.

Additionally, experts from the think tank Smart Growth America visited Pasco this week as part of a grant to identify redevelopment projects for Port Richey, New Port Richey and Pasco County. The group will present its report in a month.

Armstrong, a senior planner for the county, has no illusions about the challenges. Landscaping, attractive signage and street-scape improvements could help redefine U.S. 19 in the immediate term, and the county aims to push for all three. Low-interest loans and grants could offset costs for signs and other improvements. The county could coordinate those programs.

But he said changing the area’s demographics will take years and require broad buy-in from property owners.

"Part of the challenge is to change not just the market demographic, but also to bring in different employment options," he said. "We need to look at diversifying the population not just with younger people specifically, but with a population that is multigenerational."

One possibility, he suggested, is to focus on walkable, mixed-use developments with homes, retail and offices coexisting at the same place to lure a range of age groups.

He suggested Gulf View Square as one possibility. It could be reconfigured with outdoor promenades and condominiums or town homes, as well as retail. It might also be tied to the Werner-Boyce Salt Springs State Park’s trail system west of the mall to attract outdoor-themed businesses and restaurants.

In other cases, the county could acquire small, run-down properties, assemble them and sell them to developers.

**Seeking feedback**

Before the county takes any action, though, it will seek public input.

Starting this month, county staffers and FSU representatives will fan out across the U.S. 19 corridor to meet
individually with businesses. Early next year, it will identify possible projects.

"Our intent is not to offend anyone, not to push people away who are there now, but to create opportunities for people, a better job, a better living situation," Armstrong said. "We need a collective vision about what the Harbors plan needs to be, what people want to see there."

The county's aim is to launch its first projects in about two years.

So, how long before any noticeable shift in demographics — and the resulting economic prosperity?

That's a tricky one. It could take 10 to 15 years to see some of those results, but that will depend on public support, political will and private investment, Armstrong said.

"It doesn't matter how much I want it," he said. "It's the collective desire of that community that will make it or break it."

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**East vs. west Pasco demographics**

60,000 vehicles drive on U.S. 19 in Pasco County daily. However, the demographics of those living on the west side of the county aren't as attractive to retailers.

24% of residents who live west of Little Road are 65 or older.

9% of Wesley Chapel residents are 65 or older.

22% of the 90,000-plus housing units west of Little Road are vacant.

12% of Wesley Chapel's 17,000 housing units are vacant.

Approximate numbers provided by Pasco County and the U.S. Census Bureau.

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**U.S. 19 redevelopment a long-term pursuit for Pasco 07/31/14**

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Chris Zimmerman of Smart Growth America speaks during a workshop on Wednesday, Aug. 6, 2014, at the Big Sandy Superstore Arena Conference Center in downtown Huntington.
HUNTINGTON -- For decades life has revolved around getting from point A to B in an automobile, but both aging baby boomers and maturing millenials are setting eyes toward ditching the wheels and dusting off their walking shoes.

Huntington officials and local residents met Wednesday at the Big Sandy Superstore Arena in Huntington with representatives from Smart Growth America to discuss how this focus on compact, transit-oriented development could benefit the local economy and government.

The workshop, part of a free, grant-funded technical assistance program, was designed to provide the City of Huntington with tools and techniques to bring to reality the vision of Plan 2025, the city's comprehensive plan for physical development.

"Huntington is moving forward," Breanna Shell, Huntington city planner, said. "There's more going on than we can keep track of. We have many major developments in the works, and are reinvesting in our commercial centers."

Shell used Huntington's first bike lane along Fourth Avenue's Old Main Corridor and The Wild Ramp's addition to Central City as key examples of making the city more friendly to those living and working in it.

During the workshop, Smart Growth America representatives discussed city planning and development should revolve around the needs and desires of the public. They said studies show people are caring less about large homes on big lots in residential areas, and more about being able to walk out their front door, or their office building, and get where they want to go on foot.

Chris Zimmerman, Smart Growth America vice president for economic development, said pedestrians have been overlooked in the past, but their value plays a large role in the economic development of a community.

"The attitude that still exists in most of our communities is cars are more important than people," Zimmerman said. "Streets are considered more important than sidewalks, and that's an economic issue."

Part of that issue is more walkers and more people in the downtown create a greater need for businesses in the city center. These businesses draw more revenue per acre than businesses on the edges of the city that often have to utilize a lot of land for massive parking lots, Zimmerman said. The land taken up for parking lots is effectively wasted, he said.

Following the Smart Growth America presentation, those in attendance were asked to collaborate to discuss ways they thought certain areas of Huntington could be improved. Smart Growth America representatives said all ideas are useful in helping the city determine specific ways it can create a place residents and workers want to be.

In January 2014, the City of Huntington was one of 18 communities out of 98 selected by Smart Growth America to participate in the free technical assistance program. Smart Growth America will take the ideas generated through the workshop and use them to provide the City of Huntington with recommendations as to how to implement Plan 2025.

Follow reporter Shane Arrington on Twitter @ArringtonHD.
During a workshop at the Big Sandy Superstore Arena, two representatives from Smart Growth America described long term thinking that builds successful cities.

Huntington is one of 18 cities nationwide that qualified for a grant.

Huntington Mayor Steve Williams beamed after the opening conference --- he acknowledged that the city has already laid the ground work in many aspects for attracting and retaining residents. When John Robert, senior policy advisor and former Mayor of Meridian, Mississippi, the comparisons were stunning. Instead of a nucleus around a century old railway station, Huntington developed Pullman Square. Meridian pulled redevelopment of an opera house and a department store in conjunction with Mississippi State University; Huntington has coordinated the ongoing Keith Albee Performing Arts Center restoration and the soon to open downtown Arts Center around a vaudeville theater and a department store. Similarities to the downtown revival plans for the two cities are endless.

Williams has often spoke of attracting the new generation of "creative class" workers to Huntington, which represent the Millennials (those entering the work force in the 21st Century). Smart Growth America research confirms that the newest workers generally choose their place they want to live first, then, determine where can I find work.
Solidifying the importance of amenities such as arts and entertainment, Christopher Zimmerman, Vice President for Economic Development, and Director of the Governors’ Institute on Community Design, mentioned how "buying tickets" to a show trickles down to other businesses, such as restaurants, retail, and hotels. "When you have this kind of visual arts and performing arts atmosphere, it draws a lot of other folks who decide that's the place they want to live."

Zimmerman acknowledged that "it's expensive to fix up a theatre" but "that investment may be small compared to the other investments" that generate from the events held at the venue. "If the theatre is successful, it is surrounded by other buildings. They are more likely to be renovated, to get higher rents, and pay more taxes. These are (potential) catalysts that generate a lot of value for a community." As an illustration, they noted that one $1.3 million dollar historic investment has resulted in $135 million dollars and new life for the structure and others around it.

Roberts indicated that Meridian restored both the opera house and the Temple Theatre, which is a vaudeville venue similar to the Keith Albee. "It is still used for entertainment on a regional scale," Roberts said of the Temple, which seats about 1,800.

However, the concept of revitalizing large, former one screen performance venues "pays off big time," Roberts said, pointing his finger particularly at Flushing, N.Y. where the RKO Keith's has been left to deteriorate. "This is something you have that others don't have," the former Mississippi mayor said. "You inherit what other folks would die for. How do you use them? You must maximize the use of them. They are treasures. Those things make you different from any city in West Virginia, New York, or Mississippi.

Huntington's Keith had "angels" looking after it --- i.e. the Hyman family, but the RKO Keith's did not. Many in Flushing claim there's nothing left to restore or the interior has deteriorated beyond repair.
"The opera house (in Meridian) was full of pigeons. It was deserted when we took it over," Roberts said, noting that now it's in use almost nightly from September to May as part of an adjacent conference center.

Interestingly, Roberts said that Mississippi produces more artistic geniuses than any state in the union. He then named the icons. "You'd be surprised at the number of performers at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York that come from Mississippi."

Huntington/Ashland has a litany of successes in or related to Country music as demonstrated by U.S. 23 known as the country music highway.

Encouraging new "artists" is an expensive proposition too. The arts do not normally pay high bucks, especially those starting out in a creative endeavor. How do you help those just learning their craft or have just received a degree? Zimmerman mentioned providing artists space (at minimal cost) in old school houses, old public buildings, or former industrial facilities, as well as tax incentives and grants to artists themselves.

He added that such strategies work best when the artistic concepts are part of the communities overall strategy, such as where the community already has assets, such as a university. "It's more likely to pay off if it's an element of a strategy. Then it can look like a small investment, and small little things can make a big difference."

For instance, "Older buildings can be wonderful places for visual arts work. Sculptors need a lot of space, light and where no body cares if they make lots of noise. Sometimes that's a low cost use of space otherwise not used," he explained.

Roberts added the creative artists of the state are important to "our own people [who] must recognize what's special and different about Huntington from other cities, then, play to that strength."

An intriguing array of historic structures appeals to the creative class.

"Young professionals are looking for authentic places. They do not want Disney does downtown. They want to come to a place that knows who it is, knows where it's going, and they see a place for them within that vision," Roberts said.

Instead of designating a long abandoned location as a potential parking lot, "If it still has the majesty about it (that can be preserved), invest in that. Let it be special once again. Young people and baby boomers want to come and walk in those kind of places.."
Roberts said three keys to city growth going forward are: Who you are in the past, Who are you now, and who do you aspire to be.

Listening to the Smart Growth presentation which emphasized visions ten, twenty or thirty years in the future, Mayor Williams inquired how the city should project the future growth of education (Marshall University) and meds (the hospitals), which have been a catalyst for the post-industrial Huntington.

Roberts explained that "education" is a pillar, it's the last to abandon a city. Zimmerman emphasized "leveraging the university" to "bring [portions of the city] together."

Commenting on the downtown's integration with Marshall, Roberts said, "You have several blocks ready to pop."

And, to directly answer the Mayor's question, they both project that both "meds and eds" will have "value" in the future.
HUNTINGTON -- Huntington officials and local residents will meet with representatives from Smart Growth America on Aug. 5 and 6, 2014, as part of a free, grant-funded technical assistance program that will focus on improving the city's economic and fiscal health.

The city recently updated its comprehensive plan, Plan 2025, and these workshops aim to provide Huntington with tools and techniques to implement the vision of reinvestment in local infrastructure, housing and business. The workshops will focus on how shifting development patterns towards more compact, transit-oriented development could benefit the local economy and local government finances.

“The City of Huntington is committed to seeking the tools and training to help develop strategies that reduce negative outcomes from a combined stormwater and sanitary system and encourage quality housing and business development,” Mayor Steve Williams said. “We’re excited to work with Smart Growth America to find solutions to these and other local issues that will make our city even more attractive in the future.”

In January 2014, the City of Huntington was one of 18 communities out of 98 that applied that was selected by Smart Growth America to participate in the free technical assistance program. Stretching from New Hampshire to Idaho, these communities represent major cities, suburban centers and rural towns alike.

As a national leader in the field, Smart Growth America has accumulated extensive experience working with communities to help them use land strategically, make the most of existing resources and invest strategically to catalyze private development.

Smart Growth America is the only national organization dedicated to researching, advocating for and leading coalitions to bring smart growth practices to more communities nationwide. From providing more sidewalks to ensuring more homes are built near public transportation or that productive farms remain a part of our communities, smart growth helps make sure people across the nation can live in great neighborhoods. For additional information, visit www.smartgrowthamerica.org.