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Envision groups discuss image, culture of Fort Dodge

Residents ponder change in Fort Dodge image By DAWN THOMPSON, Messenger staff writer

First impressions are often lasting impressions.

That's why a change in Fort Dodge's image was one of a number of issues pondered Friday morning by a group of 12 faith-oriented people meeting at Best Western Starlite Village Inn & Suites. The two-hour session was one of a series of focus groups being held to develop a strategic plan for the community. Called Envision 2030, the sessions are being conducted by the Slater Group, a Georgia-based firm hired by the City Council.

"You know," said Dennis Johnson, "what I'd love to see 20 years down the road is that we have a reputation for being a caring community, one that fosters volunteerism and reaching out to one another."

Currently, Fort Dodge has a reputation for being rough and was once called Little Chicago by well-known radio personality Paul Harvey. However, the reality is not always the same as the perception, said Roger Slater, owner of the consulting firm.

"I'm from Atlanta," he said, "and I know rough, so I literally went everywhere in Fort Dodge people said not to go. I parked there and waited for something to happen. Nothing did. Nothing ever did. No one tried to sell me drugs, no one threatened me or even approached the car."

Yet, there persists a mindset, especially among people who have grown up in the area, that Fort Dodge is a rough-and-tumble town. In fact, Slater said, some of the people he encountered are proud of such an image.

"If you don't want to be rough you've got to change the culture," he said. "If you want to change it, you have to figure out what it is you want to be and create that perception. Facts are not facts. They are perceptions, they are what people believe to be true."

One means to help improve the community's reputation might be through improving the first impression visitors receive when they drive into town, said John Bruner.

"It's like that feeling you get when you walk into someone's home," he said. "If it's beautiful and nice, it creates a sense of being warm and welcoming."

Bruner envisioned the town's main entryways cleaned up with any dilapidated buildings and homes repaired or taken down. Adding trees and landscaping along the streets might also increase the appeal, he said.

"I'd like to see the redevelopment of downtown," said the Rev. Matthew Martens, of Grace Lutheran Church, "make it a place people want to go again. It would be nice to see outside cafes and areas that will make it more socially appealing."

Retail might never again fill the storefronts along Central Avenue, Bruner said, but potential

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exists to turn it into a business center. A nice river walk would also be an asset.

Session participants also said they felt the town already has a strong cultural base, especially with the presence of the Blanden Memorial Art Museum, Fort Dodge Orchestra and Symphony and the Fort Dodge Choral Society. However, such groups are not emphasized enough. The group thought perhaps a marketing coordinator could be hired to spread the word.

Other concerns expressed were finding ways to attract and keep youth while also maintaining Fort Dodge's appeal to senior citizens and young families, establishing more decent low-rent housing choices, increasing communication between churches and organizations within the community and continuing to build on the Character Counts program.

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