

Have ideas for downtown Norfolk? Speak up!

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By Virginia Lascara

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Have a vision for the future of downtown Norfolk? Now's the time to share it with the Downtown Norfolk Council, which just announced it will participate in a market-based study to create a strategic plan for Norfolk's downtown.

The council's goal is to create a holistic vision that will guide downtown through the next five to 10 years.

The final plan, to be revealed this summer, will set priorities for creating a connected and continuous urban fabric.

"Downtowns in general are hot right now," said Mary Miller, president and CEO of the Downtown Norfolk Council. "We want to make sure that we as an organization can provide the city with solid information."

The council has invited greater downtown Norfolk to participate in the strategic planning process by completing an online survey and questionnaire and by attending planning meetings.

The survey asks downtown stakeholders to share what factors are important for the improvement of Norfolk, such as festivals and events, new businesses and jobs, arts and culture, new restaurants and retail, entrepreneurial spirit and more.

"We're trying to be prepared as an organization," Miller said. "What can we have in place or what plans can we have to grab the attention of potential investors."

The open house meetings will take place March 18 at 150 West Main St. on the 21st floor, from 8 to 9:30 a.m. or from 6 to 7:30 p.m. In the meetings, members of the downtown community can share ideas and help prioritize future downtown investments.

"For a downtown area, if we want to grow the residential segments, then we need to address the opportunities within the market area," Miller said. "We have a long list of things that we want to accomplish; it's just a matter of prioritizing."

The plan will have a balance of easy-to-implement, low-cost ideas as well as some bigger projects, Miller said.

Another meeting will be held later this spring, she said.

Zack Miller, founder of the Hatch Norfolk business accelerator, said he thinks downtown would benefit from focusing businesses around the water, and hosting events that will attract more millennials.

"Having more outdoor festivals and events that millennials are engaged in will increase the cool factor," Zack Miller said. "If downtown is a product, and our product is amazing, then people will want to come."

Anything that makes the area more dense, whether it's businesses, people or energy, will be beneficial to

creating a vibrant downtown, he said.

Chris Lawrence, co-owner of the MacArthur Pharmacy, said the two biggest factors to drive downtown are more people and fewer vacancies, especially on Granby Street.

"If those two things happen," he said. "Then everything else would naturally fall into place."

