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# Making Oak St. mighty again

By BILL TEETER  
Star-Telegram Staff Writer

ROANOKE — Roanoke is looking to its past to guarantee its future.

The city hopes to capitalize on its historic Oak Street, where some buildings date to the 1880s. So officials plan to spend \$3.5 million to rebuild the street, add landscaping and create pedestrian walkways to attract businesses and customers.

"If you don't revitalize it and give them a reason to come down, they won't keep coming," Mayor Carl Gierisch Jr. said.

Oak Street, the city's downtown, has some advantages. The upscale Classic Cafe and the home-cooking Babe's Chicken Dinner House draw people to the area. Customers have to wait outside on some nights at Babe's.

But there are also challenges. Northeast Tarrant County and southern Denton County have many shopping and restaurant options. Traffic patterns are also affecting Oak Street, Gierisch said. Improvements to Texas 114, for example, let some would-be customers bypass Roanoke on their way to Texas Motor Speedway.

To help downtown compete, Roanoke hired the Austin-based consultants Gateway Planning Group in October 2003 and expects to spend about \$300,000 for its services by the end of the project, said Amy Radford, city marketing director.

City officials and Gateway planners will focus on the downtown area from Byron Nelson Boulevard to U.S. 377, with an eye to broadening the neighborhood's zoning to include a mix of shops, restaurants and some loft apartments above some businesses. The mixed-use concept has proven successful on Main Street in Grapevine, another city with a distinctive downtown.

No timetable for Oak Street construction has been set. Mike Groomer, a planner with

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Gateway, said work could be two to three years away. The design phase alone will take 14 to 18 months, he said.

A public hearing is scheduled for Tuesday.

The work will be done in stages, and steps will be taken to protect current business owners from losing customers because of road construction, City Manager Jimmy Stathatos said.

The first step will include new curbs and gutters along Oak Street. Austin Street could become a pedestrian-only promenade between Oak and U.S. 377, according to drawings by Gateway Planning. Parking lots also will be added.

Fountains at either end of the project and circular traffic medians at some intersections along Oak have also been suggested.

Flexibility in the zoning will allow both historic and contemporary architecture to help keep the area from appearing dated, said Scott Polikov, another Gateway planner.

Stathatos noted that "there are lots of empty nesters looking for a neat place to live, and Oak Street would allow them an opportunity to have a cool place to live."

To pay for the work, the city plans to obtain \$1.5 million from certificates of obligation, which are bonds that don't require voter approval.

City officials hope to get a grant from the North Central Texas Council of Governments and could also tap the city's two economic development corporations, which have \$2 million each, Stathatos said.

A tax increment finance district, which would funnel property tax money from increased property values back into Oak Street, is also under consideration, he said.

Babe's owner Paul Vinyard said he supports the redevelopment plan.

"It certainly will be a wonderful improvement to the area and hopefully attract more business and residents in," Vinyard said. "In our case, it will provide more parking for our guests, which is a plus for us."

Vinyard said he is confident that concerns such as customer inconveniences during construction will be worked out.

"The city has assured us they are going to be very sensitive to that; we're going to try to work with what comes," Vinyard said. "There will be a disturbance, but that's part of it to go forward."

Chris Wells, a co-owner of the Classic Cafe, said he believes the hassles will be worth it.

"I think it's achievable, but it will just take special attention," Wells said. "No pain, no gain."

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