

Cudahy prepares to pay for design standards

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Cudahy planners are drafting voluntary design guidelines for commercial projects with the expectation that the only way the work will get done is if the city pays for it. The guidelines, which apply to new commercial projects and renovations to existing properties, emphasize preserving and restoring the exteriors of historic buildings. Essentially, the city wants to encourage business owners to fix up their building exteriors but understands there is not a lot of money for those projects, said Sara Eberhardy, chairwoman of the Cudahy Community Development Authority. “Banks don’t want to invest or give loans to these types of things,” she said. So the responsibility will shift primarily to the city to pay for the exterior restoration work that will satisfy the standards, Eberhardy said.

The city’s Design Review Board, which must approve all projects, and Community Development Authority board are reviewing the design guidelines this month, said Lara Fritts, Cudahy economic development director. She said she expects final guidelines to be approved in March.

Creating standards that are meaningful and affordable is a common problem, said Nore Winter, president of Winter & Co., the nationwide design firm that drafted Cudahy’s rules. Money always limits what can be demanded, he said. “It’s a little bit of a chicken-and-egg issue there,” said Winter, whose company is based in Boulder, Colo. “If you aim too low, you will say that, ‘If all you can afford is X, then all you will get is X.’

“But, then again, if you aim too high, you will frustrate everyone.” Some design standards do not raise costs, Winter said. For new developments, cities can require parking lots built in the back of the property so buildings face the sidewalk, for example. Other work requires incentives, such as Cudahy’s facade grants, he said. “We do see people investing,” Winter said, “and we are trying not to discourage people from investing.”

Cudahy unveiled a facade grant program in July using \$280,000 in grant money, Fritts said. The money went to 10 projects and, in 2010, the city dedicated another \$280,000 to the facade grants using tax-incremental financing, she said. Tax incremental financing districts let cities borrow money to support development in certain areas. Taxes collected on the increased property values in the area are used to pay off the debt.

The decision to spend money on facade grants has raised questions from some city residents, Eberhardy said. “They don’t understand what that’s there for,” she said, “and why it’s an aid to the city when it comes to figuring out how to spend our tax money.” But the grants, like the design standards, will bring more customers if local business owners improve the aging exteriors of their historic buildings, Eberhardy said. “Assuming that the public isn’t in support of this,” she said, “they should be as they begin to see the transformation of the downtown area.”