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## More Plans for Downtown Development

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Eight mayors, eight cities, countless problems, ideal solutions. St. Joseph Mayor Ken Shearin returns home from putting his head together with top urban planners and architects at the Mayors` Institute on City Design. The goal of the workshops, held in Texas, was to tackle tough problems facing certain cities across the United States.

Shearin says everything is big in Texas, including ideas for downtown St. Joe.

"The downtown lends itself to several things," Mayor Shearin says. "One is professional, plus specialty retail, entertainment and living."

But before St. Joseph can slide into home, Mayor Shearin says we have to get off first base. The call -- develop the riverfront and redevelop uptown. The Mayor`s Institute on City Design workshops are yet another call to the plate.

"The DREAM initiative was the catalyst and the Urban Land Institute`s recommendations. Those two things demand that we stop dribbling and start shooting," Mayor Shearin says.

Tapped by the governor to rehab and revitalize downtown, the DREAM initiative gives St. Joseph the planning and funding needed to create an entertainment district. In June, the Urban Land Institute suggested parks, a business district or housing for 1,200 acres of empty land along Riverside Road. Heartland Hospital`s move also left vacant land smack dab on the edge of downtown.

"It was suggested that we just give that land away to a business that would come in and develop jobs for that area, and have them go in and give incentives to people in that area to reclaim some of those houses that are in there. There are some great houses that are around it," Mayor Shearin says.

Shearin says experts encourage saving those homes instead of slating them for demolition to diminish empty lots downtown.

"One of them suggested that the emphasis should be in reclaiming those great houses and putting those back into the tax structure as opposed to building new ones and letting those continue to go by the wayside," Mayor Shearin says.

In order to execute the play book, Shearin suggests starting from scratch.

"Now this is going to be controversial, but my first idea is to get rid of the Downtown Partnership and the Downtown Association," Mayor Shearin says. "I don`t think they have the finances or the people on staff that can make things happen. They`re all well-intentioned -- I know, I served on it -- but we never got the money or the clout. We`ve got this DREAM initiative that can help prompt some action instead of just talk."

His dream team would place members of the downtown organizations as well as urban developers and planners on the same page.

Mayor Shearin plans to visit cities like Portland, Oregon and Davenport, Iowa, which have similar downtown developments. He also says St. Joe will have the chance to show off its park system to other cities looking to build their own after the holidays.

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