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S.L. gets tips on revitalizing downtown

Officials from 3 cities stress pedestrian access

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With careful planning and clear laws, downtown Salt Lake City can become a thriving urban center, with housing, retail and transportation choices, a panel of officials from three comparable cities said Wednesday.

The cities — Vancouver, British Columbia; Portland, Ore.; and Denver, Colo. — each made and implemented plans to change their downtown areas. The plans focused on improving pedestrian access and creating a place where people could come with ease.

"What we think we have accomplished is something with lasting value for our citizens," said Charlie Hales, a former commissioner over transportation for Portland.

Hales was the second of three panelists who spoke Wednesday at the Radisson Hotel in downtown Salt Lake City. He was invited to Utah by a coalition — including the Salt Lake Chamber, Utah Transit Authority and Salt Lake City — that is working on a transportation master plan for downtown Salt Lake.

The master plan will address issues such as pedestrian and bicycle access, as well as streets, transit, parking and sidewalks in the downtown area over the next 25 years. Work on the plan began this summer. A draft copy is scheduled to be released on Jan. 31 in a public meeting.

Alice Steiner, a consultant working on the project, said the panel presentation showed her that Salt Lake City could, indeed, reinvest in downtown and revitalize it through transportation and land-use decisions.

"We can do it," Steiner said. "They (the other cities) started out with situations that were probably sometimes worse than our downtown."

In Portland, which has some of the nation's strictest land-use laws, city officials began work on a plan in the late 1980s to bring pedestrians back downtown. The city has built an extensive light-rail network, and regulations are in place that require buildings to have shops on their lower levels, or other elements to catch the eye of pedestrians, said Hales.

"The pedestrian is always the first-class passenger in downtown," he said.

In Denver, city officials barred automobile access to its retail area along 16th Street. It's now a crowded, popular destination, where people can eat lunch or shop at hundreds of retail shops.

In Vancouver, transit and pedestrian access are key components of the downtown area. And zoning regulations are in place to keep development styles consistent and accommodating to pedestrians.

"There is this very powerful sense of place," said Gordon Price, a former councillor for the city of Vancouver. "That's why we love where we are."

Once the draft transportation plan for downtown Salt Lake has been released, the public will be asked to comment on the plan, said Tim Harpst, the city's transportation director. It will then go before Salt Lake's transportation advisory board, planning commission and City Council for approval.

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