

Designers Say City Isn't User Friendly

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TAMPA - Tampa offers a lot to its residents. Waterfront parks, a great zoo, vibrant neighborhoods. But that's not enough, concluded a group of designers who met on Saturday to talk about pushing the town up a notch.

Many of its best features are far apart and difficult to reach, they said. Some are practically hidden.

A lot of people come to Tampa looking for things to do, landscape architect Philip Graham said. "But it doesn't matter how many great things you have. If people can't get to them easily and if it's a hassle to get around," the city's reputation suffers, he said.

Terrie Maines, a recent graduate of the Art Institute of Tampa, said her daughter recently was invited to a party at a public park south of Ybor City that Maines didn't even know existed.

"We need more connections," she said.

"Tampa is a good place to live. It has great neighborhoods," said Wilson Stair, an urban planner for Tampa. "The key is to get rail or better bus routes to tie things together."

Others said the city's future depended on opening the waterfront areas for public use.

A new group called Urban Charrette brought together the local architects, planners and designers Saturday to talk about creating a city where people want to live.

Other groups have worked on creating a vision for Tampa, said group co-founder Taryn Sabia. Urban Charrette is different because "we bring the role of imagery and design to the goal of giving a city a sense of place," she said.

They Envision A Walkable City

The 30 or so people who came to the Saturday gathering began by identifying the things that come to mind when they think of Tampa. Friendly, they said, relaxed, diverse, rich in history. And they named the things they wished Tampa would become: walkable, beautiful, cultural, cutting edge.

They divided into three groups around maps of the Tampa Bay area to pick the spots that have potential or need help.

Maines' group picked the area between Ybor City and the Channel District. "What we observed was a void between the two and the need to provide connections between them, and the need for green space here," she said.

They also drew a line from Davis Islands to downtown Tampa, winding around Harbour Island and the Channel District, up into Ybor City and over to Tampa Heights and the Hillsborough River north of downtown.

The idea, Maines said, is to create a waterfront walking and biking path that connects a collection of neighborhoods.

Suburbs Could Have Small Downtowns

Maines' group also talked about the value of having small downtowns in areas such as Westchase and Brandon, where people could work close to home and limit their trips to Tampa to cultural events.

One of the biggest challenges to pulling off these ideas is finding the money, participants said.

"Money is the root of all development," Graham said. A lot of that money will have to come from private developers because government budgets for transportation and community development are shrinking.

Sabia said the key to new projects is community support. Her group plans to broaden its efforts this year with a citywide gathering for anyone who wants to join, designers, developers, and county and city officials.

"We want to produce something valuable for the city," she said.