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Cool new core

Unique 'funnelators' key feature in slick new vision for bustling downtown

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It's the Jetsons meets Times Square as development officials flesh out their vision of what Winnipeg's new downtown will look like.

The centrepiece of CentreVenture Development's vision for the new downtown is a so-called sports, hospitality and entertainment district (SHED), which would be awash in brightly lit buildings and sidewalks, electronic billboards, overhead banners, street planters and benches.

It would also feature an outdoor public plaza -- size and location yet to be determined -- and a colourful new shuttle vehicle -- maybe a rubber-tired trolley or a tricked-out bus -- to ferry people between the SHED, the Exchange District, the cultural district and The Forks.

But the crowning touch, which will make Winnipeg's downtown different from any other downtown on the planet, according to CentreVenture CEO Ross McGowan, will be dozens upon dozens of "funnelators."

The funnelators and the signature shuttle vehicle are the newest developments in the evolving SHED plan.

McGowan described funnelators as funnel-shaped "street features" that will vary in size and colour and serve as everything from media or information centres to outdoor heating stations. Or just somewhere pedestrians can go to get out of the rain or listen to a street performer.

"It's our understanding they will be absolutely unique to Winnipeg," he said. "They're being trademarked and copyrighted."

He said they might be made out of metal, polyethylene, or fibreglass. Some might be one storey tall and others two storeys tall.

The funnelators are the brainchild of Commart, a Portland-based urban-design firm that's helping

CentreVenture come up with a design for the SHED.

Winnipeggers could get their first glimpse of the funnelators next spring or summer, when CentreVenture streetscapes the section of Donald Street between Portage and Graham avenues. McGowan said they'll likely install a funnelator on each corner of the intersection of Donald and Graham.

The streetscaping will be completed in time for the anticipated opening next September of the redeveloped Metropolitan Theatre, which Canad Inns is converting into a multi-function entertainment centre at a cost of \$16 million.

McGowan said the Donald Street streetscaping plan will be used as a prototype for similar street upgrades in the SHED.

Under a plan first unveiled last year, the SHED will encompass an 11-block area of the downtown that includes the MTS Centre, the Winnipeg Convention Centre and the Metropolitan and Burton Cummings theatres.

CentreVenture wants the area designated as a tax-increment financing zone so property-tax revenues from new developments in the area can be used to help fund even more improvements.

McGowan said negotiations with the city and province are continuing, and he hopes to have an agreement in place within the next couple of months.

He said the goal is to attract more sports, hospitality and entertainment businesses downtown, which in turn will draw more people to the area.

And more people on the streets, coupled with increased police foot patrols, should help make the downtown a safer, more desirable place to be.

The transformation of the area will begin next month, when construction crews begin demolishing buildings on the north side of Portage Avenue between Donald and Hargrave streets to make way for a \$75-million hotel/office/retail/parkade development.

The Longboat Development Corp., project is the first of nearly \$600 million of new projects planned for the SHED. The others include a \$200-million expansion of the Winnipeg Convention Centre and the redevelopment of two surface parking lots owned by Manitoba Public Insurance -- one on Carlton Street between Graham and St. Mary avenues and the other south of Graham between Donald and Hargrave streets.

An MPI spokesman said Thursday the provincial Crown corporation has drawn up a request for expressions of interest from developers for the two sites, but hasn't decided when it will issue them.

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