A Town Envisions the Future on Its Own Terms

By KIRK JOHNSON

FORT COLLINS, COLORADO — As this mid-sized city in the American West prepared to revise its long-term city plan last year — the blueprint for its future — the biggest challenge was the here and now.

Tax revenues had plunged thanks to the recession. Retailing had eroded, in a place that had long seen itself as the downtown of far-flung rural northern Colorado, taking the health of the downtown with it. Even the mechanics of the planning process, using experts in transportation and economics paid by the city, posed a daunting hurdle, not to mention how to pay for the roads and redevelopment that planning usually promises.

“We could do an urban design plan, but we didn’t have the money to pay for any of it,” said the mayor, Karen Weitkunat. “It put a reality check on what we were here to do.”

Recession — or something that feels a lot like it, retrenchment — and a steady drum beat of decline can put a damper on all kinds of innovation. But for cities, in particular, the stakes are enormous: How, in the midst of malaise stretching from the embattled eurozone countries to the mountains and plains of the American West, are they supposed to plan for a future that is supposed to be more sustainable, connected, and livable, while they are, in a word, broke?

An equally important factor, rippling through many American cities, was that one of the major traditional motivations for planning — to restrain growth that might otherwise spiral out of control — had decamped like a retreating army. Pressures on real estate and energy use from building new housing, strip malls, stores and manufacturing space were simply no longer what the new plan, or any plan, needed to address.

“What everyone agreed on was that everything had changed,” said Joe Frank, the city’s advance planning director.

But limitations produced opportunities. What emerged from the new reality — options reduced at one end, but opened up at the other in thinking past the old go-go model of real estate as the engine of prosperity — was a fundamentally different way forward.

Scholars who track land use and economics say the new chemistry in Fort Collins was in some ways like the shuffled political alliances after the Cold War, where once-competing interests now cooperated.
“Four years ago I thought I understood development; now I think it’s anybody’s guess,” said Lisa Schweitzer, an associate professor in the school of policy planning and development at the University of Southern California.

With development pressure off the table, environmental-minded groups and residents no longer needed to focus obsessively on fighting things like sprawl and could turn their attention to other topics, like energy. And businesses that had prospered under the old model — build it and they will come — had to look for new ways of thinking, too.

So Fort Collins reached out as it never had before, seeking volunteers and input, and, just as crucially, ideas about how to finance a new future in an age of limits.

And those reaching back, including some people and organizations who had never participated in city planning, from arts groups and beer brewers to technology entrepreneurs and professors at Colorado State University, created the city’s new vision of itself — an ambitious and comprehensive plan, even by the standards of bigger cities in more prosperous times.

Democratized by necessity, the process led to goals that went beyond the predictable safe streets and commerce that planners might have otherwise emerged. In a departure from the old command-down process — planners proposing, residents disposing in public planning meetings — ideas bubbled up in new ferment.

The city’s history, culture and geography all played a role in how that happened. Established as an outpost of the U.S. Army, Fort Collins grew in relative isolation from the bigger urban centers of the American West, like Denver, Colorado’s biggest city, to the south, or St. Louis, Missouri, to the east. Meanwhile, a big public university, founded initially with a focus on agriculture, evolved into a center of energy and technology research, and a relatively mild climate attracted retirees and entrepreneurs.

The blueprint that emerged from that mix in borrowing from other cities and from local ideas in the works, centered on connection — new ways of thinking on how to link residents in physical space, but also in culture and economics. Rethinking the nature of downtown when retailing sputtered created new bridges between recreation, tourism and arts, which led in turn to the idea of an overarching theme, or brand — local green energy — that bound everything together.

In one example, a grass-roots proposal for a hyper-green downtown electricity grid, which was preparing for its pilot-project phase even as officials began meeting, got a lift by incorporation into the plan.

In another, an arts and music community, which had been gaining ground on its own, including an arts project that used vacant storefront windows as art projects, was anchored into a new downtown vision.

In a third, an emerging mixed-use neighborhood of beer brewing, bikes and tourism got a new shoulder behind the wheel.
Planners looked for the strengths and tools they already had, and ran with them. “They took what was gaining in momentum and grabbed on,” said Cheryl Zimlich, a board member at the Bohemian Foundation, a private nonprofit group that funds downtown music and community-development projects.

This part of Colorado, and indeed Colorado as a whole, were not among the worst-hit places in the U.S. recession, a fact that also helped planners here as they looked for new directions.

That sense of relative stability started at the university, more than 30,000 students and staff members, a huge economic force in a city of 144,000.

The community involvement that came into play in the planning process also helped local leaders buck the anti-tax fervor that has rippled through U.S. politics — residents voted in elections last year, even as the economic downturn lingered, to support tax increases to pay for local improvements to roads and parks. But even if the world wasn’t exactly crumbling, city officials still realized that a changing economic foundation, like ice melting from underneath, had changed many fundamental assumptions.

Big retail chains had colonized the outer reaches and smaller surrounding towns during the boom years — an archipelago of rural Wal-Marts and Home Depots that made a trip into town for jeans or groceries no longer necessary. In the 1990s, as much as 40 percent of the local sales tax had been paid for by non-residents. Even before the recession, that proportion had fallen to 25 percent.

The embrace of arts and culture in the plan — the idea that Fort Collins could create a kind downtown regional arts and entertainment experience that would draw in regional residents, even if they no longer came to shop as much — was part of the response. What groups like the Bohemian Foundation had already been doing received new attention.

But perhaps the core example of the new planning chemistry came in rethinking the nature of local electricity, in a collaboration of businesses, community groups and academia — again, already far advanced when the planners sat down — that ultimately became a kind of vehicle for the city’s evolving self-identity.

The project, conceived in 2007, already had a name, FortZED (short-hand for Fort Collins Zero Energy District) and it aimed, with huge ambition, to create one of the largest urban net-zero energy districts in the world — about two square miles, or five square kilometers, including the university’s main campus, and 50 megawatts of electricity.

Net zero essentially means that energy in, through electricity produced locally in the district through sustainable methods like solar, would equal energy consumed by the district’s residents and businesses, meaning that no added electricity would be needed from the coal-burning power plant that currently supplies most of the city. Getting there over a 10- to 15-year timeline means intensively and creatively managing both supply and demand, and connecting both together through computer management programs.
Crucial to FortZED's appeal was also that it had money. A $6.3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Energy, and $5.1 million more in local investment, had given the project enough legs to begin what it called a “jump start,” a pilot project this year aiming to demonstrate that the district could cut its demand at peak times, while testing the integration of new internally produced energy.

“That early work brought $11 million of investment into the community at a time when economy was slow and investment was slow,” said Steve Catanach, the Light and Power Manager at Fort Collins Utilities, a city-owned power company that got solidly behind the FortZED idea.

But things didn’t always go so smoothly.

Early in the planning process, for example, talk emerged of a new culture and business district based around beer-brewing, called the Lincoln Triangle, home to three microbreweries that had become popular tourist destinations. Some traditional transportation planners contended that the district would need more traffic lanes to handle all the ardently hoped for added visitors.

But then some of the economic development collaborators, thinking in different ways about downtown, spoke up. Not more cars, they said. Instead, they wanted more pedestrians, more bikes, more life connected to the new ideas bubbling up around FortZed.

“After that it just crystallized as a catalyst project area, a beer district within the energy zone,” said Benjamin A. Herman, a vice president at Clarion Associates, a land-use consulting firm that worked with the city.

That one of the breweries, New Belgium Brewing, was also an anchoring force in FortZED — running part of the brewery already on a combination of solar and bio-gas energy from the fermenting process — connected the dots: electricity, beer, and an emerging brand for the city folded into one. The Triangle became yet another improvisation in a moment of life that had arrived without a script.

Some planning experts said that a Fort Collins method — anchoring many elements around a centrally connected ultra-green downtown — could become a model for other cities. In any case, at least a dozen countries, and many other cities in the United States, have sent representatives here to look. And that curiosity itself, expressed through hotel and restaurant traffic if nothing else, locals said, has been helpful to local cash flow in a slow time.