It's not necessarily what the people want, but it's better than what it was.

That sums up the consensus of some of the city of Fort Myers' biggest critics after hearing a new plan for midtown, downtown and the Gardner’s Park neighborhood.

“It’s better than what they had last time, but I still don’t think it’s ready for prime time,” said Gene Gibson, a Fort Myers resident.

The city convened a workshop Thursday to foster dialogue on its plan, a revamped version of a proposal that faced fierce opposition when it went before City Council last April.

The purpose of the plan is “to develop an integrated strategy for the growth of and connections between downtown, midtown and Gardner's Park.”

Thursday’s meeting, which lasted two and a half hours, was at the City Pier along the Caloosahatchee River in downtown Fort Myers.

The city provided a two-sheet handout called “proposed amendments to future land use element,” along with an agenda titled, “Fort Myers integrated downtown redevelopment strategy advisory committee workshop #3.”

Although it was open to the public, it technically was not a public hearing.

The formal public meeting will be from 4 to 7 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 18, at Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center in downtown Fort Myers.

Steve Belden, the city’s community development director since June, led the workshop. He outlined two objectives: to discuss the proposed amendments and to get input and discuss the vision plan for midtown. He described them as “two efforts that dovetail with each other.”

Amendments to the city’s comprehensive plan must go before council, then are transmitted to the state for a 30-day review. The city then has 180 days to review and make changes before adopting the plan. City Council is expected to take up the matter during a public meeting on Monday, Feb. 5.
“We have to establish a starting point,” Belden said. “This is not the end of the process, this is the beginning of the process.”

The vision plan for midtown is in “mid-process, so we’re looking for feedback,” over the next couple of months, he said.

Belden said comprehensive plan amendments provide the framework. Once that is established, it’s possible to get into the details of land development codes and zoning districts.

“We tried to address concerns the public has voiced throughout this process,” he said of the revamped proposals.

What has been the biggest criticism? Detractors would say the city hasn’t been transparent enough and has not offered enough opportunities for public comment.

As for the plan, the largest issue in the initial proposal had to do with “unlimited density bonus,” which effectively allows developers a wide berth to build as they see fit.

“There really wasn’t a limit on that … so we felt that it was important that we did address them,” Belden said.

The community development director quickly went point by point through nine items related to proposed amendments. Those ranged from a new “future land use category” to “allowable density” to “future land use policies.”

Belden said it was important to create the category because there are certain amenities that the city might want to offer as incentive in midtown that might be different from downtown.

Residential neighborhood protection, an addition under the new plan, would ensure that no high-rise would be built next to single-family homes, such as in areas of Gardner’s Park. The new proposal limits density, intensity and height allocation.

“There’s a lot of moving parts here,” Belden said. “The existing comp plan, what was previously proposed and what’s proposed now.”
Located south of downtown Fort Myers, midtown is a small, diverse piece of Fort Myers with relatively residential housing and many large vacant lots whose values are already rising on investor speculation over the city's midtown plan, allowing unlimited density and height, and a CRA expansion that would extend the wealthy downtown CRA and its potential TIF rebates to the midtown area.  (Photo: Google maps)

Midtown is bounded by Cleveland Avenue, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, Fowler Street and Edison Avenue.

“This is by no means a finished product,” Belden said.

City staff and consultants from the University of South Florida came up with the revamped proposed amendments based on feedback.

Fort Myers’ midtown plan inspires fear, loathing and love

Ann Pierce, a Fort Myers resident and city activist, said the city is going about this business in the wrong way and that the process has been strung out.

“The vision comes first, the plan comes next,” she said. “It should be presented to the public in one package.”

There is more than one way to do this, Belden countered, with the city taking the approach of addressing the comp plan and the land development plan in tandem.

Pierce referenced a “lack of trust given what happened last year. It behooves the city to err on the side of maximum citizen input.”

Belden said public input will continue next week during the Jan. 18 public meeting and past when council takes up the matter Feb. 5.

“So that’s just one public meeting for something this massive?” Gibson said. “How are you going to get the word out to the public that this is happening? The city doesn’t have the trust of the citizens.”

“That’s a challenge,” Belden said, acknowledging that he might be looking at the matter through “rose-colored sunglasses” since he didn’t have a role in the matter until last summer.

He said there are more than 60 people on the advisory committee “so it’s not like this is a small, select group of people.”

“I can’t really speak to the distrust issue,” he said. “It’s there. I’m trying to overcome that.”

Kaye Molnar, president of Cella Molnar & Associates, said word is getting out to the public through social media, the city’s website and the Downtown Property Owners Association, message boards around the area and via advertising in The News-Press.

Ann Martindale of Dean Park said it was hard to make sense of it all.

“I don’t understand the urgency in having the plan approved now,” she said. “There hasn’t been a great interest in getting widespread public input.”

“I think the future of Fort Myers is at stake,” she added later.

Steve Hooper, a Fort Myers resident, was the harshest critic Thursday. He is most upset with the process, believing city leadership already knows what it wants to do.

“This isn’t what we want,” he said.

Hooper, who said he was the first of 42 people to speak at last April’s council meeting, also questioned the city’s perceived need to push the process along without enough feedback.

“Again, I ask, what is the rush?” he said. “And why will this not be the product of public input?”
A map of downtown and midtown Fort Myers displayed during a workshop Thursday. (Photo: Casey Logan/The News-Press)

The final part of the workshop involved the audience being broken into three groups in order to look over a “density scenario catalog,” along with maps and preliminary sketches.

Trent Green, associate professor of architecture and urban design at USF, called the midtown proposal a traditional urban design model with a village or town center concept that compliments the plan of Andres Duany, the noted planner who devised a downtown plan that the city adopted in 2003.

“We want to get your opinion on these density ranges,” Green said, urging folks to mark it up and offer comments. “Do you like the concept, the big idea we’re working on?”

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Seeking public comment

The city of Fort Myers wants the public to check out the plans and to receive feedback.

Visit MyFMDowntownMidtown.com (http://myfmdowntownmidtown.com/) and provide your input.

If you go

- **What:** Public meeting
- **When:** Thursday, Jan. 18, 4-7 p.m.
- **Where:** Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center, 2301 First Street, downtown Fort Myers

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