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Eustis makeover should spark business, officials say

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EUSTIS

Wide sidewalks with ample room for window shoppers to stroll, restaurants with comfortable outdoor seating that allow diners to linger over long lunches, and park benches strategically placed for relaxing and people watching.

Welcome to the new downtown Eustis, circa 2010.

If all goes as planned, downtown Eustis will be getting a much-needed face-lift complete with wider sidewalks, enhanced parking and a new traffic pattern. It could

be the shot in the arm that downtown businesses need, city officials say.

After a series of community workshops and extensive planning, city leaders recently approved a plan to revamp downtown.

"It's really an exciting time," said Wayne Carter, executive director of Eustis Main Street Inc.

For months, city and community leaders have been working with businesses and

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residents to determine how best to revamp downtown. The plan, recently approved by the Eustis City Commission, calls for changes along East Magnolia Avenue and North Eustis Street, the city's main streets.

Among the changes will be to adjust one-way streets to allow for two-way traffic, replace angled parking with parallel parking and nearly double the sidewalk widths. The plan also calls for more parking, including converting a city parking lot at Magnolia Avenue and Grove Street to a public lot.

The improvements will also provide "visual appeal," said J.P. Weesner, a senior urban designer for the Orlando-based planning firm Glatting Jackson Kercher Anglin.

The sidewalks will be lined with trees and dotted with decorative planters and park benches. Shop owners will be able to display their wares on the sidewalks, and restaurants will have ample room for outside dining, Weesner said. Many of the sidewalks will go from about 7 feet wide to about 14 feet wide.

"It's a huge benefit," Weesner said of the wider sidewalks.

The project could cost up to \$2.44 million. The city already has \$1.25 million set aside for it and will be applying for additional grants. The next step will be to finalize contracts and design plans. From there, construction could begin as soon as spring, Weesner said. City leaders are hoping to have the work completed by this time next year.

Carter said local business owners welcome improvements to downtown. When Florida Hospital Waterman moved to Tavares in 2003, it hurt downtown's economy. That, coupled with the shoddy economy nationally, has hurt many Eustis businesses.

He said that about half the downtown businesses — about 40 of the 80 — will feel the effects of the construction. But business owners are willing to do what it takes for the improvements.

"There's probably never a good time to do this. But we can do this now and be done with it and not have to worry about it for another 50 years or so," he said. "What we hope to do is let people know we're open for business downtown."

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