

## Downtown of the future: Fiber optics, new housing

By RICK RATLIFF  
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The future of downtown Detroit, as envisioned in the city's proposed master plan, depends less on banking, government or commercial development than on exploiting underground cables of glass hairs.

Those so-called fiber-optic cables, which are being laid by Michigan Bell Telephone Co. under Woodward Avenue from downtown to Pontiac, are designed to carry computer communications and huge numbers of telephone or video signals with great clarity.

**THE PLAN** suggests such changes as adding housing, office buildings and government centers near People Mover stations; building an automotive museum; developing an elaborate system of sidewalks and bicycle paths along the riverfront, and connecting downtown buildings with a climate-controlled pedestrian bridge network.

But "the primary purpose of the

central business district is communication," the plan says, so the city must "take every step possible to support and facilitate this role."

City Planning Director Corinne Gilb, whose department developed the master plan, says the fiber-optic system will form a junction with another one to be built along Michigan Avenue, making downtown attractive to high technology companies that want to hook into those systems.

**THE DOWNTOWN** Central Business District should be bolstered as a banking center, the plan says, and the city should encourage international banks to locate branches in the city.

The plan says downtown retailing, which has withered in recent decades, should be geared to residents and workers within a five-mile radius. It called for development of a shopping mall, but does not specify a site.

The plan calls for making downtown look more like Greektown, with



Corinne Gilb

lively storefronts, street banners and canopied windows. It suggests African architectural motifs incorporated into the facades of new downtown buildings to reflect the fact that the more than half the city population is black.

More downtown housing is needed, the plan says. It calls for adding 15,000 residents to the 4,000 now there.

It calls for improved housing in neighborhoods near Woodward,

But, the plan says historic preservation "should not impede development that is essential to making the city or its neighborhoods economically viable."

## Build on auto industry, plan says

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Economically, the new master plan says, Detroit should encourage emerging and growing industry while supporting the auto industry that has been its traditional base.

Physically and socially, the plan admits, the city still bears the burdens of the last three decades: poorly educated residents, high unemployment, thousands of abandoned homes and a declining population.

Politically, the plan notes, the continuing population decline will erode the city's clout at federal and state levels, and the city must find new ways to enhance its image and political impact.

The plan also says the economic, social, physical and political aspects of the city are intertwined. For example, it says, luring new business creates jobs, which rebuilds neighborhoods.

**THE PLAN PUTS** great stock in setting up fiber optics corridors, and luring new business such as genetic

engineering, specialty chemicals, lasers, component testing labs, pre-fabricated housing and other new industries. Detroit can promote unique sites like the city's salt mines, cargo access at City Airport and the free trade zone in the port area.

But the plan says that can happen only if the areas slated for new businesses are "brought up to the level of Detroit's finest neighborhoods . . . (and) their image is attractive to prospective employers."

The plan notes repeatedly that federal and state grants are an enormously important part of luring business to Detroit.

Second to retaining and enhancing the city's economic base, the plan says, the city's "most compelling requirement" is to retrain workers and to improve the education level.

**AS OF LAST** year, the city had 15 square miles of vacant land, 10 percent of the total area, according to the plan.

The plan says the city should explore new ways of allowing neighbors

to buy or take responsibility for vacant land and for the city to crack down on negligent land owners.

It warns that without a program to rehabilitate almost half the city's housing — that built before 1935 — abandonment "can be expected to increase at a vastly accelerated pace during a very short period of time."

On the city's major thoroughfares scarred by rundown commercial strips, the plan says, much of the land should be rezoned for strictly local businesses, such as convenience stores, or as residential areas, parks or parking lots.

To bring more people back to the city, the plan says, the city also must be more attentive to the needs of young adults and others without children.

"A city that is concerned about adults, especially young ones, will attract more adults," the plan says, suggesting retailing and other schemes to lure them here.

The plan also calls for taking steps to assess and reduce the city's infant mortality and teenage pregnancy rates and child abuse.