

# The votes are in: Permanent Sidewalk Market top idea for improving downtown Huntsville

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HUNTSVILLE, Alabama -- Mayor Tommy Battle called Thursday night's downtown ideas summit a "continuation of a conversation" started by Huntsville's earliest residents in the 1820s.

But it's a safe bet that the city's founders never talked about Wi-Fi accessibility, electric car charging stations and skydiving tunnels.

Those were among the more than 500 downtown improvement ideas submitted by the public over the past month on the city's website, [huntsvilleal.gov](http://huntsvilleal.gov), and Facebook page.

A standing-room-only crowd packed the Big Spring Partners building on the courthouse square Thursday to hear Battle reveal the most popular suggestions.

A permanent sidewalk market was the top vote-getter, followed by a unique skyscraper to transform the skyline, SmartCode zoning and a downtown greenway or riverwalk.

The No. 5 idea drew chuckles from the crowd: move Huntsville City Hall, which hogs a chunk of prime real estate overlooking Big Spring International Park.

One voter recommended turning the eight-story building into a boutique hotel.

Many other ideas landed just outside the top five: a late-night diner, better public transit, commuter rail service, a fountain depicting Huntsville's role in space exploration.

Dave Dieter/Huntsville Times Joe Davis Stadium on South Memorial Parkway has been the Huntsville Stars' home since 1985. Some would like to see the city build a new ballpark downtown,

In response to an audience question, Battle said one idea on the list - a new downtown ballpark - has been batted around recently.

He said a developer suggested that the city sell the Joe Davis Stadium site to Walmart, which would like to open a megastore around Airport Road, and use the proceeds to build the Huntsville Stars a new home downtown.

"It's an interesting thought," Battle said.

Another idea mentioned Thursday -- more affordable downtown housing -- may be the closest to reality.

Husband-and-wife developers Charlie and Sasha Sealy held a groundbreaking ceremony last week for their \$11.5 million Belk Hudson Lofts project.

The couple is turning the vacant Belk department store building on Washington Street into a 75 loft apartments renting for \$850 to \$1,3000 per month.

The city is paying them \$450,000 over five years to leave the building's Depression-era outer walls intact -- a development incentive known as a facade easement.

Charlie Sealy said Huntsville is teeming with people who hail from bigger cities -- Washington, St. Louis, Denver -- and crave downtown living. He said he initially thought the lofts would mainly appeal to young professionals, "but we've had interest from all age groups."

The city is also looking at SmartCode zoning, which puts a premium on walkable neighborhoods where homes, schools, shopping and workplaces mix comfortably.

Providence was this area's first SmartCode development.

Acting Planning Director Marie Bostick said the city has no restrictions on building heights right around the courthouse, making a cloud-skimming skyscraper a future possibility.

However, there's a three- to five-story limit on streets where downtown meets Twickenham and Old Town.

Battle said whatever happens downtown should not "step on the toes" of people living in the nearby historic neighborhoods.

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