

LJ focuses on future

By JOHN LOWMAN | Posted: Wednesday, January 25, 2012 2:00 am

LAKE JACKSON - The city's main concerns for the future are economic development, technology and term limits - and the condition of Brazosport ISD - council and city staff members agreed during a four-hour brainstorming session.

Economic development issues include the need to attract and keep young families, a lack of available property to grow and the need to continue developing Lake Jackson's identity as the regional population expands, consultant Ron Cox said Monday.

City leaders met with Cox for the first of several annual vision and goal-setting workshops, something they've been doing for six years. The session was open to the public, informal and no votes were taken.

Internal issues include the need for wi-fi hot spots, continued focus on parks and fitness, and consideration of changing the terms of term limits, Councilwoman Heather Melass said.

School issues are something the city can discuss but not change, Cox said.

"I've seen other cities wrestle with these issues," Cox said. "You all are talking about developing ways to make the public aware of the impact BISS has on the community. It's not just a school issue. It's a community and economic development issue."

Campuses like Dawson High School in Pearland and the multi-story Angleton High School, both opened in the last two years, can attract residents, said Councilman Joe Rinehart said, a Brazosport ISD employee. He said the school system here is a good one, but it has some needs.

The nationwide economic crash of 2009 and subsequent sluggish economy had much to do with that, Assistant City Manager Modesto Mundo said. A \$70 million bond issue failed in 2009, and the district is considering a \$40 million measure to repair roofs and flooring along with technology and security updates, Superintendent Karin Holacka has said.

The district's designation as "property-rich" means much of its property tax revenue is sent to the state to be redistributed to other districts, City Manager Bill Yenne said.

Lake Jackson's population is aging and needs an influx of new residents, and Yenne said changing the perception of Brazosport ISD from an aging district to a strong one will help bring them in. So will a continued focus on parks and technology, Melass said.

There already are places downtown which have free Internet service, and she said incorporating that into a downtown park would be beneficial. The city already is ahead of the game with widespread parks.

"We were thinking about investing in green spaces before green was cool," Melass said. "We need to let people know this is a fun place to play, live and retire. We need to get the word out to draw people here."

Economic development ideas included completing downtown street construction, updating the Lake Jackson Civic Center and finding a way to effectively advertise city amenities along the soon-to-open Highway 288, which also is Highway 332.

Mundo called it "adjusting to and benefiting from the new highway," and ideas included signs and other avenues telling people what is in Lake Jackson so they don't just pass through on the way to the beach.

"It may be the only exposure visitors have while going to the coast," Mundo said.

Councilman Scott Schwertner agreed with Rinehart that finding a way to light the welcome sign just north of FM 2004 is a good idea. Attendees also said approving a mixed-use zoning area - allowing residences above businesses - might be a good idea.

Mayor Bob Sipple, whose tenure in May reaches the limit of three, two-year stints, said term limits could lead to some lack of continuity on council. He also mentioned the city's lack of land for further expansion and need for zoning to keep motor homes and mobile homes from setting up in traditional-build neighborhoods.

Councilman Bob Geter said while the Brazosport Area Chamber of Commerce does a good job marketing the area, the city might benefit from a dedicated economic development director. He also said council should consider boosting city employee salaries.

The next workshop is set for 5 to 9 p.m. Feb. 27 at City Hall. The public is welcome to attend.

John Lowman covers Lake Jackson City Council for The Facts. Contact him at 979-237-0149.