



and plans integrate a future light rail line. "We believe Meridian will be the largest winner in a transit route," Wardle said.

The initial master plan will be presented to the public sometime in January, while a final plan is tentatively scheduled to go before the City Council in February, said Laura Hanson, associate principal at CRSA.

Meridian is a blank canvas for planners since the majority of the city is devoid of large, historic structures that could guide development. It's both an advantage and a challenge, offering no backbone to spur redevelopment. "In a lot of communities, you're reacting," Hanson said. "Here, we're really planning from the ground up."

Already, the city has implemented a number of large changes to the downtown landscape, including replacing the iconic Challenge creamery with a city hall and municipal building, and rerouting traffic by creating separated one-way streets through the core of town.

The linchpin of changing downtown Meridian is luring new businesses. When the city began looking at redevelopment, the focus was on large companies with more than 500 employees. But now, Wardle said such lofty ambitions just aren't realistic. Instead, the city is putting its hopes on the "creative types" willing to take a chance on redevelopment in exchange for the opportunity to have an influence on the community.

City leaders are also excited by the interest the Boise Hawks baseball team has shown in possibly relocating its stadium. While no decision has been made, Meridian is on the short list, and planners have already created a downtown design that includes a possible stadium.

The initial designs, as well as blogs and assorted public forums the city is trying to use in the planning process, are all part of [destination-downtown.org](http://destination-downtown.org), the Web site Wardle hopes will include more residents in the process.

While much of the plan is still just talk, one business already sees opportunity in Meridian. [Vengaworks](http://Vengaworks.com)--which opened its first location in Meridian last year--will open the city's first downtown business incubator in January 2010. Ground Floor is an adaptive workspace, where clients can rent office space depending on their needs.

Randall Ussery, product marketing for Vengaworks, said the company likes Meridian in part because of its central location. With Ground Floor, he saw the opportunity to provide space for initial start-up companies, small businesses looking to grow, freelance professionals, and sales groups looking to move into the community. It's an approach Ussery believes is more sustainable for the long term. "If you get 30-odd businesses working in this area, they bring business downtown, and it's a snowball effect that will take place once you get just a few businesses down there," he said.

And while planning moves forward, one lingering issue remains: defining the personality of Meridian. It's been a question that has been hard to answer. While Wardle describes it as a young community full of families, even he has a hard time providing a definition. Several ideas are being considered, including, "We celebrate on our stomachs," in reference to restaurants and nearby farms, but no decision has been made. "You can't force it," Hanson said. "It has to come from the community."

She believes that change is a very real possibility for Meridian, but it will take one or two catalyst projects to make it happen. "The perception that it's a bedroom community will have to be eroded over time," she said.