

Downtown Residents Association (DRA)

Position Paper on the Proposed Downtown Plan

The Downtown Residents Association (DRA) is a newly formed and growing organization of downtown Evanston residents dedicated to balancing economic development with residential quality of life. To that purpose, the DRA presents its position on the proposed Downtown Plan.

We commend the City, first of all, for undertaking an analysis of its land use to plan for the future. The proposed Downtown Plan is an attempt by the consultants to deliver on the Downtown Plan Committee's Guiding Principles. The plan constitutes an outline and as such is the first draft of a larger undertaking. As the process moves forward, the DRA hopes that the Plan Commission, the Planning and Development Committee, the Zoning Board, and the City Council will use this proposed plan as a step toward building a downtown that will: 1) grow with residents and businesses; 2) develop into a destination center for work, entertainment, and recreation; and 3) sustain itself, as well as contribute to the larger Evanston community with an economic base that is vital, versatile, and conducive to responsible future development. Finally, as an organization of downtown residents, the DRA is resolutely committed to maintaining a neighborhood community in downtown Evanston.

The following reflects our comments/concerns/recommendations/changes:

Development Framework and Implementation Strategies

1. Building Heights

On the issue of proposed maximum heights in the Downtown Plan, the DRA believes the height restrictions should reflect the wishes of downtown residents that have been repeatedly communicated to the Plan Commission and the consultants in public meetings. The proposed maximum base height restrictions for the Traditional and Transitional districts are, for the most part, reasonable. We wish to make the following changes:

- The Northern Edge Transitional District along Emerson to Ridge (RD-3) should be designated as another Transitional RD-2 district
- Maximum base heights for all Core districts should be reduced as follows:
 - Central Core (DC-3) area should be 20 stories with a maximum of 200 feet
 - West and East Core (DC-1) and Core (DC-2) areas should be 10 stories with a maximum of 100 feet
- Maximum public benefit heights (maximum height with bonus) for the Core districts should be limited as follows:
 - Central Core (DC-3) area should be limited to 30 stories with a maximum of 300 feet
 - Core (DC-2) area should be limited to 20 stories with a maximum of 200 feet
 - West and East Core (DC-1) should be limited to 15 stories with a maximum of 150 feet

2. Form-based Zoning

For downtown residents, form-based zoning is a potential benefit in that it specifies a prescriptive framework for height, form factor and architectural design. It defines to a large extent what structure can fill a certain site, eliminating the possibility of developers not fulfilling the commitments and agreements made in the planning stages. However, form-based zoning must be transparent; it must preserve a component of public review and an opportunity for feedback on "significant projects" – a category which requires clear, specific definition. The Plan should ensure that the final product(s) correspond to the approved designs.

3. Public Benefit Bonuses

The suggested public benefit bonus structure to earn additional variances should be modified to include very tight administrative controls to promote objectivity, thus eliminating back door deals and public confusion about features such as height and setbacks in a developer's design vs. the realities of the final product. These controls should provide the following non-negotiable assurances:

- Bonus incentives for "significant projects" should result in substantial contributions to the overall welfare of Evanston and its residents
- All projects must promote intelligent, sustainable development which enhances the quality of life in downtown Evanston for all Evanston residents
- Gold/Platinum LEED certification or equivalent green building design; adequate loading docks for commercial and residential uses; street and sidewalk improvements; alley improvements; and underground parking relate most DIRECTLY to development and must be incorporated into every development design, not included as public benefit bonuses to negotiate variances
- The remaining public benefit bonus elements and percentages should remain as stated in the Plan

4. Commercial/Office Development

The DRA views the downtown business district as a prime economic engine for Evanston, yet the Plan does not provide a course of action to attract the appropriate mix of local and national businesses that are needed to sustain a vibrant city center for all Evanston residents and visitors. The Downtown Plan should incent businesses to remain in the downtown district and stop their departure to other suburban communities (e.g., the recent relocation decision of the Methodist Pension Board to Glenview). The geographical downtown needs to have a vigorous business community that can support development, as well as the amenities residents and visitors expect. The proposed Downtown Plan should specify incentives for larger commercial companies to bring jobs and employees to downtown Evanston, to stay in downtown Evanston, and to become a part of the fabric of downtown Evanston. Look to the reasons book publisher McDougal Littell invested in downtown for ways to attract other companies of that size and larger.

The proposed Plan presents a narrow view of development that puts too much focus on new residential development while not identifying those existing office structures that could benefit from renewal through rehabbing. As for the existing businesses and commercial lessees, where in the plan are the strategies for keeping those businesses that have been part of the renovation of the downtown economy, but that will be displaced by new residential developments? The development of new office space is critical to the success of the Downtown Plan and should be encouraged by adding public benefit incentives.

The Downtown Plan and the DRA support locating Evanston's Civic Center in the downtown area where it would be accessible to all because of the availability of not only parking, but public transportation. The Plan states "moving the Civic Center to downtown...to increase the office-based population would be a boost to the downtown business community." This move also makes a governmental commitment about the relative importance to its residents, businesses, and visitors.

5. Performing Arts Development

Urban centers are often the location for entertainment venues. The Plan only includes line-item citations about a performance center and a center for youth activities. Missing in the Plan is the vision for space that could attract the theater/performance artists who would significantly add to the economy just as the movie theaters have. The Plan should include a detailed design and concept for a performing arts center that could perhaps replace the empty building and concrete plaza north of

the Chase Bank Building, just as it did with its concept and design for Bookman's Alley. This would be accessible and a draw to residents and non-residents alike because of the in-place multi-modal transportation system, available parking, and restaurants.

Parks, Open Space, and Pedestrian Environment

The DRA comments/changes are as follows:

- The Downtown Plan proposes reconfiguring some surface parking lots into green spaces, such as the parking lot near the Women's Club. The plan missed some city-owned lots that could become pocket parks (such as the lot on Oak between Davis and Church).
- The Plan doesn't consider how patrons of the YMCA and King Home would agree to being displaced from the parking lots at those respective sites.
- We agree that plans for resituating Oldberg Park may help alleviate the confusion for drivers and pedestrians while creating an appealing resting place and entrance to the Downtown.
- The proposed Plan missed the opportunity to specify designs for rooftops that could be greened according to environmental principles and replace the unattractive white-washed or black-tarred open space.
- Wouldn't it make sense – and lend credibility to the naming of the street – if real Maple trees were planted in center planters on Maple Avenue from Church to Emerson?
- The Plan must require independent light and wind studies, not developer-sponsored, for proposed new significant development.

Circulation and Parking

With development comes increased traffic. The proposed Downtown Plan succeeds in identifying problematic intersections at Orrington/Clark and Sherman/Orrington/Davis. It isn't clear that there is a deliberate plan that will improve these points of entry/exit vs. one that will merely serve to change driving patterns and create new troublesome intersections elsewhere.

The DRA comments/changes are as follows:

- Independent, not developer-sponsored, traffic studies must be part of the plan to improve circulation as new developments and businesses increase traffic. This should include traffic outside of the Downtown area that may be affected by Downtown changes (i.e. Sheridan Road, Ridge Avenue, Asbury Avenue).
- The DRA agrees that there is adequate public parking, but believes that further study of residential parking is required.

In conclusion, we understand that the City must address a myriad of issues and satisfy a variety of constituencies as it approaches the difficult task of ensuring a vibrant and viable downtown for Evanston. As residents of the downtown area, we feel our voices are especially relevant, and we hope our comments, concerns, recommendations, and proposed changes will play a key role in your deliberations.