

Downtown Residents Association (DRA) Position Paper on the Plan Commission Revised Draft of the Downtown Evanston Plan dated November 10, 2008

The Downtown Residents Association (DRA) is an organization of downtown Evanston residents dedicated to balancing economic development with residential quality of life. Having participated in the planning process for the Downtown Plan from its inception and having presented our initial position on the draft at the December 17, 2007 Plan Commission meeting, we have reviewed the Plan Commission Revised Draft and are back to present our updated position at this time.

Economic Development

- The DRA views the downtown business district as a prime economic engine for Evanston, however, the Plan does not sufficiently address the requirement for a comprehensive marketing plan which includes incentives to attract the appropriate mix of local and national businesses needed to sustain a vibrant city center for all Evanston residents and visitors. The Downtown Plan needs to include guidelines directing the City and other agencies to market downtown Evanston as a place to locate businesses and to encourage downtown businesses to remain.
- Another key to economic development is having a detailed plan built around the current one-line strategy of encouraging restoration of the Varsity Theater (or another downtown site) as a performing arts venue. As the Century Theatres have proven, an entertainment complex attracts visitors and produces much-needed revenue for the City and downtown businesses. The City of Wilmette has successfully transformed its 94-year-old Wilmette Theatre into a marquee North Shore attraction offering live theater, stand-up comedy, documentaries, concerts, live children's theater, and after-film discussions with critics, directors, and movie stars. With the base we have built thus far in Evanston, we should be up to the task of creating a similar space here that would benefit visitors, local artists, the City, and downtown businesses.
- Locating the Civic Center in downtown Evanston where it would be accessible to all because of the availability of not only parking, but public transportation would be a plus and, as mentioned in the original draft Plan, "a boost to the downtown business community". The move would also make a governmental commitment about the relative importance to its residents, businesses, and visitors.

Development Framework and Zoning Districts

On the proposed framework for the Downtown Plan, the DRA believes zoning should reflect the wishes of downtown residents that have been repeatedly communicated to the Plan Commission and the consultants in public meetings. We reference Figure 6A – Revised Draft in Section 6 of the plan and Figure 1.1 in Section 8 for our recommendations below.

- The proposed zoning classification and maximum height for the North Edge (A) district is not appropriate for the area. This district along Emerson to Ridge should be zoned the same as the Northwest Edge (B) and East Edge (E) districts which contain similar residential or mixed use buildings. Zoning should be RD-2 with base heights of 66 feet (6 stories) with a maximum with bonuses height of 110 feet (10 stories). DRA disagrees with the Plan in that it creates an RD-3 district unique to the North Edge district.

- The area west of Maple Avenue and south of Davis Street currently in the West Core (G) should be placed in the South Edge (D). The east side of Maple could remain in the West Core.
- The southeast corner of Davis Street and Chicago Avenue should be designated as part of the East Edge (E).
- In the West Core (G) and East Core (H), the height differential between the base height and the maximum height with bonuses should be greater than 33 feet (3 stories). This minimal height difference will not provide sufficient incentive for developers to incorporate public benefit bonuses for the return value of so few stories. DRA recommends that the base height be reduced to 110 feet (10 stories) with a maximum with bonuses height set at 165 feet (15 stories).

The above recommendations would result in a multi-tiered skyline moving from heights of 66 feet (6 stories) - 110 feet (10 stories) in the Edge/Link districts; to 110 feet (10 stories) - 165 feet (15 stories) in the East/West Core districts; to 165 feet (15 stories) - 275 feet (25 stories) in the central Core district. The three Traditional districts would remain intact at 38 feet (3 stories) - 60 feet (5 stories).

It is important to identify which projects will require Plan Commission and public review. We agree with the review and approval process as outlined in the Plan for new developments. Plan Commission and public review must be required for any projects in the Core districts that exceed a FAR of 3 or have a height of 110 feet (10 stories) or more as stated.

Although the consultants have concluded there are a limited number of opportunities for new development in downtown Evanston, we respectfully disagree with this statement. With the as-of-right ability to build higher based on revised zoning restrictions, current property owners may be incented to sell or tear down existing buildings to create higher-density developments. Therefore, a process which includes public review is required.

Public Benefit Bonuses

The DRA commends the Plan Commission on its public benefit bonus structure. It will promote objectivity, transparency, and opportunities for public review. The bonuses contribute to the quality of life in downtown and benefit all Evanston residents as well as visitors. DRA especially commends the Commission on requiring green roof and LEED pre-certified design as entry points to public benefit bonus consideration.

Physical Environment

- 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 suggested park to the west of the YMCA along Grove is an inappropriate choice for a pocket park. The alley is an access route to and from the YMCA parking lot on the south and trash receptacles are stationed in that section of the alley. Children would have to be very careful crossing the alley to get to the park. At best, it is an enhancement for the residents in the building to the west.
- The plans that resituate Oldberg Park and reconfigure Orrington into Clark need to be specific so residents know how traffic will flow and how pedestrians will access the park and stores or restaurants along the park.
- The Plan mentions no requirement for independent light and wind studies for proposed new development that will have a major impact on the surrounding residences, businesses, and pedestrians. This should be added.

Transportation

- 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 development (i.e. Sheridan Road, Ridge Avenue, Howard, and Clark).
- The DRA agrees that there is adequate public parking, but believes that further study of residential parking, as well as, guest parking is required. Public parking will be enhanced by the Plan's recommendation to put parking under green, open spaces.

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 visioning 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.