

Opinion

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Realistic DDA plan on the mark

IT WON'T be just another bureaucratic study destined for a dusty municipal bookshelf.

It will make a difference. Farmington's proposed downtown development plan should go a long way toward increasing the central business district's commercial property values. Since 1980, they've lagged behind those of the rest of the city and of Oakland County.

Wide ranging yet cost conscious, the five-phased plan is designed to not only bolster the tax base downtown but also unite merchants in promotion and marketing. It's long on vision yet short on gimmickry. It builds on public improvements begun a decade ago.

The plan calls for \$1.4 million in public improvements — pedestrian lighting, shade trees, sidewalks, planters, benches, utility pole relocation, shielded trash compactors.

Plans include more, greener and better lit parking areas, walkways that better link downtown areas, a spruced-up Downtown Farmington Center mini park, a new mini plaza on Grand River west of Farmington Road, even a new road that would go south from Orchard Street.

CITY LEADERS are banking that DDA-promoted public improvements will stimulate private investment — and continued rejuvenation — downtown.

The need for revitalization is obvious. Even a brisk walk through the central business district reveals glaring deficiencies: vacant storefronts, service businesses occupying prime retail space and an inadequate retail mix with no higher-quality menswear shops or sit-down restaurants.

Public improvements also can serve as a rallying force for brighter storefronts that play upon a building's original look, not upon design elements from an unrelated time period.

The thought is that rehabilitating older buildings — through facade and sign renovation, landscaping and innovative

show window displays — helps establish a downtown as a source of community pride and a symbol of community vigor.

Says DDA planning consultant Christopher Wazany, "The image of downtown, in effect, is the image of the city on us. It's a representative physical element that says something about the people of the city."

JUST AS waiting until vacant stores outnumber occupied ones before revitalizing makes no sense, a quick fix isn't the answer either. Past attempts that stressed beautification only attest to that.

What's now needed is to play up downtown's strengths: the small-town charm, variety of stores, nearby parking and competitive pricing. Even the oldness is a plus. It provides distinctiveness and character, things many long-time residents identify with.

Prudence has been its hallmark. But the DDA would be wise in re-examining the proposed pedestrian crossing on Grand River near Warner. Even though it would be well marked by signs, it would have no traffic light. Bluntly put, pedestrians could end up playing Russian roulette.

How will proposed improvements be paid for?

The development plan identifies several sources: tax increment financing, a 2-mill levy on all taxable property within the district, a special assessment district on the north side of Grand River east of Farmington Road, community development block grants and city council support.

Tax increment financing, a somewhat controversial funding scheme, would provide the most money — \$1.2 million. Evaluating its proposed use is fodder for another day.

But make no mistake about it: before you fund a project, you need to substantiate its need. And the development plan provides such substantiation — convincingly.

— Bob Sklar



Media exploiting Bailey?

IN CHURCH Sunday, one of the prayer leaders asked for prayers for the family of Ronald Bailey. He indicated the family needed help in getting through its ordeal in a situation that was being "exploited to the hilt by the media."

I'm sure that his feeling for the suffering being endured by Ronald Bailey's parents made him wish that there wasn't quite so much attention being paid to the Bailey trial. It is being covered in metropolitan and suburban newspapers as well as television stations. And there is an awful lot of testimony coming out that probably will haunt the Bailey family for years to come.

RONALD BAILEY, 22, is charged with kidnapping and murdering a 12-year-old Green Oaks Township boy named Shawn Moore. Bailey's defense attorneys have admitted that Bailey killed the boy but say that Bailey was insane at the time, driven to insanity by the sexual exploitation of a psychiatrist at Northville Hospital.

The fact is that this is a pretty awful story from beginning to end. One can read the testimony — at least excerpts of it — in the newspapers and feel particularly sorry for Ronald Bailey's father as he attempts somehow to try to help the situation, by explaining the life of Ronald Bailey.

No matter how much I sympathize with him and his family, however, I can't quite get over the suffering en-



Bob Wisler

dured by Shawn Moore. Witnesses told of seeing a young boy, his heels dug into the road, being dragged along by someone who looked like Ronald Bailey.

IMAGINE the feelings of that boy, by most accounts an average, happy child who liked his life and his family, suddenly being grabbed off a road, taken to a cabin in northern Michigan and subjected to God knows what fear and humiliation. And what about the moment that this young boy realized, as he must have, that his very life was in danger, that he would never again see his mother, father, sister, brother, home?

This is a horrifying crime to be sure. Perhaps many would not look to see accounts of it in the newspapers. But this is the kind of crime that begs to be reported and explained.

This is not so much a crime that panders to a thirst for sensation but an important crime that we must try to understand. If we can understand it all, perhaps we can try to ensure that something like it won't happen again, not in our town, not in our neighborhood, not to our children.

WE OFTEN understand murders that come about during robberies and rapes, arguments and fights. We understand much of the darker side of human nature — greed, jealousy, lust, revenge. But we have a great deal of trouble understanding aberrations of the kind displayed in the kidnapping and murder of young children. Perhaps, out of the testimony, out of the crime reports, we can begin to understand what it is that twists young minds or impels people to act in extremely bizarre and hostile fashion.

If we can learn something from it all, then maybe we can learn that we should try to ask questions when we see a young child being pulled down the street. Maybe we can learn how to get people who need treatment into the proper facility.

Maybe we can learn something that will enable us to push for the kind of mental health system that we need to try to ensure that some future troubled young person doesn't slip through the cracks.

AS MUCH as I feel that the Bailey family could use some privacy, I think there is a larger concern, that of society. We need a sense of security and feeling that we are, as a society, doing everything we can to assure that our most troubled members won't turn on our most helpless members.

We need light on the subject, and that is why the trial of Ronald Bailey is important.

Cooperation is key to success

AT THE Kalamazoo Gazette in the '60s, we had a long counter with stacks of newspapers from other cities.

I'll never forget the day nine of 10 papers had the same top headline on a local story — an annexation battle between the central city and a township. We were all following the same script with different names.

That feeling of déjà vu returned last week as the general government committee of the Oakland County Board of Commissioners battled over whether to establish a satellite clerk's office in the populous "south end."

COMMISSIONERS from Southfield, Huntington Woods, Oak Park and Hazel Park argued that folks from their compact area shouldn't have to travel to Pontiac to get marriage licenses and do other paperwork.

They hinted that majority Republicans were being selfish. In Wayne County, the shoe is on the other foot. Suburban Republicans (and a few Democrats) think the county should establish a satellite office in Westland or some suburban point.

The argument in Wayne County is even stronger than the "south end" argument in Oakland: Wayne suburbanites not only must travel to Detroit for paperwork, but pay Detroit's exorbitant parking rates, deal with rudeness and fend off panhandlers. In the Oakland County Service Center, parking is free, and you don't have to walk far to the buildings.

I RECALLED a 1982 luncheon with Wayne County Executive William Lucas in which one of Lucas' advisers — a distinguished vice president of something or other in his 70s — insisted Wayne County's problems were "unique."

"Get rid of that guy," I whispered to Lucas afterwards. "No county is unique."

Lucas didn't, of course, and it was one



Tim Richard

reason he made so many serious mistakes as county executive. Lucas sent his minions to Lansing to get changes in laws regulating counties of more than 2 million population. He did nothing to help his brother executives of Oakland and Bay counties, who face most of the same problems.

One can make a good case that one of the great tragedies of Detroit's mayors — not just Coleman Young — is that they viewed Detroit's problems as unique in the state and worked only for Detroit.

Well, any problem that Detroit has can be found in Benton Harbor, Flint, Muskegon and a few other towns or states. I suspect there would be much less antipathy toward "those people" in Detroit among outside legislators if the mayors of their problem cities could get the leaders of Detroit to work with them.

THE NOTION that a community is "unique" is widespread.

The editor of the Kalamazoo Gazette in the '60s used to sneer that Birmingham was just an auto town, and only Kalamazoo was unique.

An insular snob — and bad policy. A community is "unique" only in the same way that every human being's fingerprints are unique. Otherwise, 99 percent of our genes are the same.

"Unique." I abhor that chamber of commerce word. Whenever I work on the copy desk, I try to knock "unique" out of our columns.

I wish I could knock it out of Michigan's political vocabulary.

Solving conflict — just neighborly

BACK IN THE '60s there was a lot of talk about neighborhoods dying. Usually that was a euphemism for white flight, as whole city blocks seemed to move out to the suburbs, away from congestion, smog and equal opportunities for housing.

Those were the days before garage sales became popular, which was unfortunate because the suburbanites carted along some excess baggage better left behind.

Their baggage included the peculiar dichotomy of demanding expensive city services, while wanting their new community to remain a rural backwater. Twenty years later, suburbanites have found that they couldn't have it both ways.

IT'S BEEN A struggle for city and township leaders to reach a balance between good city services and just enough development to pay for them.

Canton Township, perhaps the last farm community in the metropolitan area to develop, eventually survived sometimes acrid arguments over whether to make a green township into a law.

But the impact of I-275 was inevitable, bringing business as well as home-



Sandra Armbruster

owners to Canton. Together they helped pay for a library.

The story is the much the same in Livonia, where two major freeways have filled industrial parks and created the need for expanding subdivisions.

The nearer communities reach full development, however, the less neighborly business and residential areas seem to become.

IN SOUTHFIELD, homeowners have filled city hall on repeated occasions this year, clamoring for relief from having skyscrapers acting as vertical blinds on the horizon. Yet not one has suggested that any city service be dropped to reduce costs which businesses help fund.

Farmington officials also have warily watched development along Orchard Lake Road, which, like 12 Mile in Southfield, became outmoded the day wide-

ing was completed.

Clearly the concerns of Canton a decade ago are being taken up by communities gasping for breathing room, using tactics such as buying up land (Farmington), erecting barriers even between subdivisions (Troy) and down-zoning commercial property (Birmingham) to ventilate space.

This time there's no need for suburbanites to pack their bags and move on. All that commotion is no death rattle for their neighborhoods.

Instead, it is a reminder that people fill those homes and offices, and that people working out conflicts is part of being downright neighborly.

Michigan 150 years old

THE FIRST woman to attend the University of Michigan was Madelon Stockwell Turner (1845-1924) of Kalamazoo. She entered in 1870 and was so intellectually gifted that she graduated in just three years. To Albion College she gave Stockwell Library, in memory of her father.