

Vision for the Valley

By: Megan Cooley

Spokane has Riverfront Park, a downtown mall and a historic hotel. Coeur d'Alene has a resort, a college campus and a big gleaming lake. Cheney boasts a pedestrian-friendly downtown and Liberty Lake promotes Pavillion Park. And then there's Spokane Valley.

After decades of urban sprawl, the new city decidedly lacks a town center or recognizable identity. Stand along Sprague Avenue, the city's main street by default, and you might as well be looking down Seattle's Aurora Avenue, a long and ugly example of strip development gone wrong.

So how can Spokane Valley create a unique identity out of a mishmash of features including a large shopping mall, eight-mile-long Sprague Avenue, vacant big-box retailers, countless car lots and postwar neighborhoods?

As one solution, the Spokane Valley City Council is considering developing a town center - which would take time, effort and millions of dollars in public and private investment.

A place where the community would gather, where people could leave their cars behind as they shop or conduct business, where kids could play in a fountain in summer or on the ice in winter, where workers could eat lunch outside, under a tree.

All of that, and people living nearby, as well.

"In order to have a vital city center, we need high-density residential development," including apartments, town houses and condominiums, Planning



Commission Chairman Bill Gothmann said. "We need parks there where people can go and sit down and feel comfortable. We need to build business-friendly streets."

In January, the City Council asked city staff to study what it would take - in terms of planning, investment and infrastructure - to develop a pedestrian-friendly city center in the University City area on Sprague.

According to a Portland-based urban design consulting firm, \$20million of public money would give Spokane Valley an enviable city center.

During the next two years, the city will conduct its own study, and take input from the public, to rewrite its interim plan for using the land.

Spokane Valley adopted the county's land-use plan when it incorporated because state law requires cities to have one in place. The city has until spring 2006 to adopt its own community blueprint and to close the books on the county's.

The comp-plan work will help create a vision for how the city could look in five, 10 or 20 years. And that vision may be far different from how the Valley looks now.

"I think that the Valley is certainly a very successful retail magnet, and adding the other amenities that would make it a full-fledged 24-hour live-work center

would make it very appealing," Spokane developer Ron Wells said.

Two groups already have created conceptual plans: **Crandall Arambula PC**, the Portland firm that was hired by Spokane Regional Light Rail to develop ideas for transit-oriented development; and urban-design students at Washington State University.

Although some business interests and residents oppose the theory - along with the potential cost - of a pedestrian-friendly city center, others are inspired by the vision of "new urbanism" taking root in a community that's decidedly suburban.

"This would create a 'living room' for the community," said Kim Traver, Spokane Regional Light Rail project manager. "It would create a town-square feeling."

Living, working, playing

New urbanism is a movement in city planning that creates communities where people can live, work and shop in the same neighborhood.

In Portland, the once industrial Pearl District on the northwest side of town is now a mix of art, retail and chic apartment buildings.

In San Jose, Calif., a project called Santana Row opened in 2002 to counter that city's urban sprawl, which had been breeding since the end of World War II.

"We stopped growing outwards and started growing upwards," said Joe Horwedel, San Jose's deputy planning director.

Some downtown Spokane projects take a new urbanism approach by encouraging living, working and playing in the same area. They include the Blue Chip Lofts, a warehouse that's been converted into condominiums, and the proposed Havermale Park, a retail and residential complex.

There's no telling how new urbanism might look in the Valley.

Maybe grassy parks and meandering trails would replace whole city blocks of asphalt and abandoned buildings. Maybe condominiums would go up and stores like the Gap, Joel or some chichi restaurants would locate on the ground floors of those buildings. Maybe citizens could visit City Hall, the library and the grocery store without getting into a car.

Over a series of four public meetings since October, **Crandall Arambula** used public comments to create concepts like those for the Valley.

Traver said such development likely would sprout up around stations if light rail or some other rapid transit system came into the area.

But "these are sound business proposals with or without the existence of transit," Traver said.

A vibrant, walkable core

The city center envisioned by **Crandall Arambula** would stretch more than a mile west to east, between Herald and Bowdish roads. It would be sandwiched between Sprague Avenue and Appleway Boulevard.

There would be another lobe on the opposite, north side of Sprague, including Spokane Valley Fire Department's Station 1.

Dartmouth Road would become a narrow, walkable street lined with stores and outdoor cafes.

Park blocks would replace the

self-storage units and vacant buildings, such as Rite Aid's former home east of Rosauers supermarket. Town houses, condominiums, lofts or apartments would line those small parks.

Residential buildings would go up on the vacant land behind U-City, giving drivers on Appleway a more appealing view than what they see now - the backside of buildings.

Retail shops and restaurants would face Sprague, especially east of University Road, replacing - or mixed with - an existing gas station, Farmers & Merchants Bank, Halpin's Pharmacy & Treasure Room and other businesses.

Even a pedestrian-friendly center with good mass transit would need parking lots. The planners envision parking cars behind those businesses, so people pulling up would see storefronts instead of oceans of asphalt.

Trees would line the streets as an attractive buffer between traffic and pedestrians, making walking from business to business more pleasant.

City Hall, a library and other civic buildings could locate around an open-air plaza where U-City's parking lot sits now. The plaza might have a fountain where children could play during the summer and a living tree to decorate during the holidays.

The goal, consultant George **Crandall** said, is to have the phrase "Meet me at the plaza" reverberate through the Valley.

Crandall called open spaces, such as parks and the plaza, the area's "amenity package." If open spaces are included, "people will want to get next to it," he said, referring to private developers.

Spokane's downtown "amenity package" - Riverfront Park - benefits the businesses around it. For proof, look at the crowded restaurants and stores whenever there's a concert or other event in the park.

But how do you persuade property

owners to tear down strip malls, which earn \$2 to \$9 per square foot, to plant grass? Orville Barnes, who manages U-City for University City Inc., called such open spaces "non-productive."

"We need to make any green areas a part of what would be a more productive development," he said. "Maybe an ice-cream shop next to a park might work, but not that many things are quite that way."

Traver said creating open space is key to creating a vibrant city center, though.

"Why would anyone want to come in and build a condominium next to a parking lot?" he asked.

Crandall Arambula's plans include ample parking, just not as a central focus. And Horwedel, of San Jose, said people literally are tromping through shrubs to get to Santana Row.

"People will walk long distances if you make it interesting," he said.

Barnes is skeptical. Without convenient parking, he said, customers won't come to even the most attractive development.

Crandall Arambula estimates that such a city center, fully blown, would require \$20.3 million of public investment in Spokane Valley. The firm estimates that the public investment would attract \$224.1 million in private development, or an 11-to-1 overall return on the city's money.

Supporters say so-called catalyst projects, such as a new City Hall or streetscape improvements, are necessary to attract private developers and to jump-start the idea.

Councilman Gary Schimmels said making a catalyst investment in the area is a viable idea for Spokane Valley.

"The fire station's there," he said. "A library should go there, as far as I'm concerned. The city needs a City Hall. We don't want to rent forever."

But others question the wisdom of

spending public money to turn productive private land into parks. Among them is Valley commercial property manager Joe Ward.

"And then we lose the tax base. Go find (land) where there isn't anything and start with the park first," Ward said.

Part of **Crandall Arambula's** concept involves cutting more north-south streets into the large blocks that comprise the U-City area - a move the shopping center already said it will make.

By May, Barnes plans to develop a street between Sprague and Appleway just east of Percy's Cafe Americana to give customers better access to U-City. ... Rob Brewster, who is developing the live-work-play Havermale Park complex in downtown Spokane, also thinks a Spokane Valley city center could become reality. In fact, Brewster approached the city last fall with ideas for a housing project.

"The city wasn't as cooperative as I would expect from a young burgeoning city," he said. "In other cities, you're seeing a progressive outlook. (Spokane Valley) didn't hit me that way."

But with the right design criteria and the guts to enforce them, Spokane Valley could transform its image, Brewster said.

Wells said developers likely would see Spokane Valley as an attractive opportunity.

"It's an interesting challenge to take a motor vehicle-driven area, where pedestrians are not really thought to be part of the equation, and then change the urban design so that you create a more pedestrian environment," he said.

"There's a lot of potential."