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A bold Downtown plan rooted in what's best

By DAN HALEY

I grew into middle age in Oak Park supposing that in significant ways my hometown had peaked. I'd sit at the stoplight at Ridgeland and South Boulevard idly looking at the decrepit storefront that had housed a string of grills I'd never even think of eating in. Later when it became an ethnic clothing store, I'd think, shabby, but at least it isn't a grill.

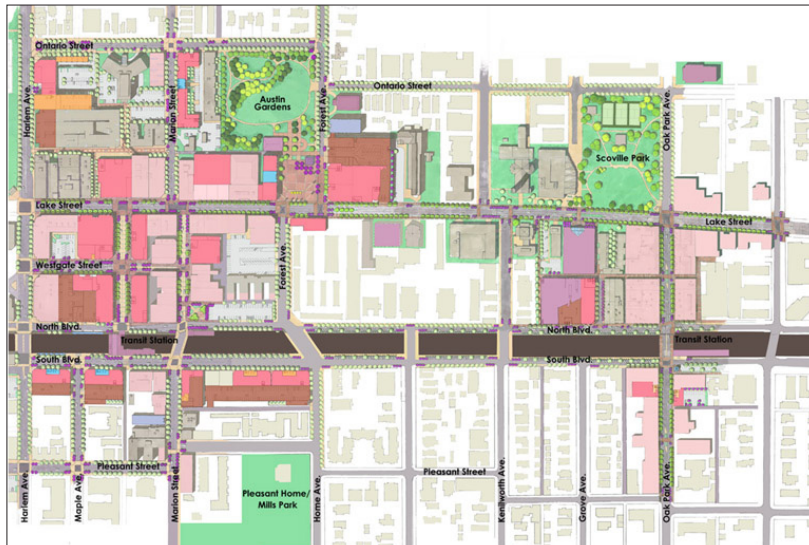
I'd walk past the armed guard at the Chernin's Shoe Express in what had, not so long before, been Marshall Field's, and I'd think, at least the place isn't vacant.

Now Ridgeland and South is home to my favorite new building in Oak Park. The Ridgeland is an elegant condominium and, maybe, someday, there'll be a couple of useful stores. Chernin's is bankrupt and Border's is a notable upgrade at Lake and Harlem.

When Seymour Taxman came to town a decade ago and built the "Shops of Downtown Oak Park" with its Gap and Old Navy and TGIFridays, it seemed like a new day, in a suburban sort of way. Then, last week, the consultants hired by the village to put downtown under the magic microscope for one more pipe dream, audaciously said the "Shops of Downtown Oak Park" were "recyclable" buildings that would most likely be replaced with more ambitious development in the foreseeable future. That, said George Crandall, who is a stretch older than me and still foresees the bulldozers rolling into Pier One, is why his firm's new plan for downtown calls for an eight story retail/parking/residential building to sit hard against the Old Navy parking lot.

If I've got it right, that would put it just next to Station Street, an entirely new boulevard that Crandall Arambula just thought up.

This, my friends, is the boldest, most practical, most fun, most real plan for Downtown Oak Park



since the late 1920s/early '30s when Field's went up at Harlem and the Lake Theatre arose at Forest. This is not a pedestrian mall when honest-to-goodness paid consultants said the key to success was public fountains.

This is not the mishmash of what the village government has been trying to do on its own for the past 10 years when it made like Donald Trump, buying land and entertaining unrelated proposals from developers.

This is a plan. It reflects a cohesive vision which sincerely incorporates a wide range of public input. It is rooted in, and respectful of, the many things which work in Downtown Oak Park and along Lake Street to Oak Park Avenue. It has priorities that are numbered from 1 to 22 and has a clear sense that if numbers 1 to 5 aren't underway in the next 18 months to three years that the village has squandered its money. It has the demanding backup detail that spells out not just what ought to be built where, but what materials it ought to be built out of and how demanding we have a right to be that it is architecturally exceptional.

One gets the feeling that George Crandall and Don Arambula actually "get" Oak Park—and, after 50-plus meetings with all the good hearts and cranks we call neighbors, that they respectfully say nothing on Lake Street should be taller than "MF height."

What's MF height? asks the reporter, thinking it's consultant buzz. Well, they say, it's Marshall Field height. Nothing on Lake should be taller than the most notable building on the street. You have to like that.

There will be naysayers. But this time, finally, after all the screwed-up plans made by the village, no one can say they weren't consulted.

This is a great future in a hometown that hasn't nearly peaked.