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Downtown plan is a bold vision for the future

And we should not let fear of change blind us

Trustee Gus Kostopulos

The recently adopted plan for the redevelopment of our downtown is a remarkable document—not just because of its content which is very good, but also because of the broad community process that created it.

At no other time in recent memory have so many Oak Park residents been so actively involved in creating a plan. And it shows. I urge anyone who doubts that the plan reflects the will of the community to review the documentation of citizen participation and see for themselves the extent to which the views of the majority shaped the final plan.

Of course, the plan is not without its critics. They have talked a lot about the character of Oak Park and the values that have made our community something truly special. What they seemed to have forgotten is that it was this very character and the values its citizens shared that pushed us to actively pursue changes that would be in the best long-term interest of the village as a whole.

Those brave social activists who some three decades ago articulated views representative of the character and values we Oak Parkers now hold so dear were not immediately embraced by the community. They had to battle intense criticism, primarily from those citizens who feared change. The critics then, like today's critics of the downtown plan, were understandably more comfortable looking to the known past rather than the unknown future.

But now is not the time to let fear drive our community planning or to lash out at those who support it. The rude behavior exhibited at the recent village board meeting where the plan was adopted certainly did not lend credibility to the criticism of the plan or the critics' opinions of the nationally recognized planners who help create it. Frankly, I was embarrassed for the community by how some there conducted themselves.

Several good things have happened downtown during the past few years. But I urge anyone who doesn't think more needs to be done to spend some time strolling Lake Street, Westgate and Marion Street mall. If investors wanted to be here under the current circumstances there would not be so many empty and underutilized storefronts. And there would be a lot more people walking these streets too.

I truly believe that unless we are as brave as those who put Oak Park on the map as a bastion of broad minds and vision, these areas will likely remain

unchanged and will continue to do little to enhance the character of our downtown that critics of the plan claim is so evident.

As an architect I know the wisdom of preserving history. But my profession also has taught me that unless we balance our passion for preservation with the recognition that the new can be good, too, then there can be no future. If we don't make at least a little room for the new, where will the next Frank Lloyd Wright perfect his craft?

The values that put Oak Park on the map fostered changes that, in their time, were controversial and even radical to many. But those days are now little more than fond memories to we Oak Parkers who lived them and curiosities to scholars who study the evolution of social change. Perhaps it is time for those of us who remember those heady times to start spending a little less time reminiscing about the past and a lot more time imagining the future.

Yes, it can be hard to accept that all that is old is not good—especially for those of us who are getting older ourselves. But the simple fact is times change and either we change with them or get left behind. I don't want to see that happen—and I don't believe my fellow long-time Oak Parkers do either. By now we should know from experience that new development can occur even as we continue to work to preserve the historic character of our village.

Nearly half of Oak Park's current residents have lived here 10 years or less—nearly a third five years or less. They are the future of the community. And I suspect it was their participation in the process that made the more radical aspects of the downtown plan such as the new Station Street and opening the mall to limited traffic, preferred elements.

Thanks to the input of so many, we now have a downtown redevelopment plan that provides a solid framework within which we can take long overdue, much needed steps to better focus investment interest toward helping revitalize the commercial heart of the village. The plan clearly and creatively demonstrates how we can embrace the new while still preserving the best of the historic character we Oak Parkers care so much about.

You don't have to agree with everything in the downtown plan, but how can you criticize the process created it or the goals that it has set? It is bold, innovative and comprehensive. But it is still just a plan. Let's do as we did so many years ago to articulate the character and values that put Oak Park on the map—get together and work out the details.