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Fairmont: Will board OKs plan to fix up 'distressed community'

By Tony Graf tgraf@stmedianetwork.com April 19, 2012 8:22PM

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A renovated community center is surrounded by community garden plots in this artist rendering of what a Neighborhood Center in Fairmont could look like. | Courtesy Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

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LOCKPORT TOWNSHIP — Visions for the Fairmont area include a new neighborhood center, senior housing, new business opportunities, a farmers' market, more parks and smart environmental planning to address flooding problems, under a neighborhood plan approved Thursday by the Will County Board.

The plan includes broad goals for the neighborhood, and is not a formal development proposal. The board reviewed the 78-page document, prepared by the county land-use department with help from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

"The plan represents the residents' vision for where they'd like to see themselves in the next 10 or 15 years, and provides strategies to achieve those goals," said Trevor Dick, senior planner with the metropolitan planning agency.

"The plan is not set in stone," Dick said. "It's meant to be flexible. It can adapt with change. The plan impacts land use, parks and open space, transportation, housing and commercial development."

Fairmont is an unincorporated neighborhood east of Route 171, between Lockport on the north and Joliet on the south. Planners held several meetings in the neighborhood — and listened to residents' opinions and goals — while drafting the plan.

While reviewing the neighborhood's history and future opportunities, the plan acknowledges that Fairmont faces problems in the present.

"Fairmont is a distressed community with a declining population," the plan states. "Although it is surrounded by growing communities, Fairmont has lost population and is faced with high poverty and unemployment rates."

Visions for future

Key elements of the plan include:

New neighborhood center: "The residents of Fairmont really wanted to see a place where there could be new housing, where there could be new neighborhood commercial opportunities, new parks and open space — something that would be a focal point for people to meet, gather and say, 'This is our own neighborhood center,'" Dick said.

The neighborhood center is envisioned south of Oak Avenue and east of Green Garden Place.

The center could include a neighborhood shopping center, a farmers' market, a community plaza, a senior assisted-living facility, senior independent-living duplexes, community gardens, a recreational park with sports fields, and playgrounds.

The center would incorporate existing structures: Shiloh Baptist Church on the northeast, a retention pond west of the church, and the Fairmont Community Center.

Senior housing: During the planning process, residents told planners that they want to live in Fairmont after they no longer want to maintain their single-family detached homes, Dick said.

Dick paraphrased their goals: "We want places where we can live and we can still stay close to our church and close to our friends."

Infrastructure: The plan addresses concerns about flooding and aging infrastructure in Fairmont. The plan discusses potential improvements, new sidewalks and new bus shelters.

The plan goes beyond improvements to the traditional piping. "Green infrastructure" is important: Detention ponds that have native plantings to help with flooding; bioswales; and pervious (or permeable) paver parking lots, created as development occurs in the area.

"So I think a combination of the traditional approach and the green approach could really help minimize flooding in the area," Dick said.

"In-fill" development: The plan addresses the problem of vacant properties in Fairmont.

"Between the U.S. Census and our field inventories, approximately one out of every nine homes in the Fairmont community is vacant. That's a real big issue," Dick said.

"The plan really focuses on in-fill development, trying to get residents to move back into those vacant lots, fill up those vacant homes," he said.

James Moustis, county board chairman, asked if the plan addresses housing strategies to keep younger people, who go away to college and otherwise might not come back to Fairmont.

Dick replied: "The plan talks about a diversity of housing. You're absolutely correct how important that is for a community such as Fairmont ... and not just for seniors, but also for younger families."

"The affordability of smaller homes on smaller lots is definitely going to be attractive when the potential market does come back. And I think that will be attractive to younger families," he said.

New parks: "We recommend adding new neighborhood park sites throughout the community," Dick said.

Under the planners' concept, almost all residents would be within a half-mile of a park.

"A half-mile service radius is really what's considered a safe and comfortable walking distance," he said.

Parks would include small playgrounds, open space, community gardening areas, and stormwater management features.

Community gardening: "People saw that as not just an activity, but as an economic development tool — a place where maybe the community could grow their own fruits and vegetables, and in turn sell it at a farmers' market," Dick said.

Garden plots would surround the community center, under the concept approved Thursday.

At a glance

Fairmont was founded in the early 20th century to provide workforce housing for industries in Lockport and Joliet. Today, the neighborhood is about 2 miles by 2 miles and is home to about 2,500 residents.

The neighborhood is primarily single-family detached homes, but also includes many community facilities, which create a strong, unique image and identity.

"In listening to that community, we realized that it functions almost like a small municipality, with its own identity, its own needs and its own concerns," said Steve Lazzara, senior planner with the county land-use department.

And that's another part of the plan: Capture the rich history and identity of Fairmont.

“One thing we found, when we were doing the process, is there was nothing really written down. So one of the first recommendations is to do a formal documentation process ... to document the history of the community,” Dick said.