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## Yorkville ... imagine this

**Planners present city of the future, but some residents aren't so sure**

July 21, 2009

By ROWENA VERGARA [rvergara@scn1.com](mailto:rvergara@scn1.com)

YORKVILLE — On a mid-June evening, a group of residents filled the chairs of City Hall and faced a projector screen.

The topic: downtown Yorkville. The presenters: a group of Chicago-based planners and designers showing three scenarios of what the center of the city could look like in the future, anywhere from 10 to 30 years.

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This is a view of the southeast corner of downtown Yorkville, east of Route 47 on Hydraulic Avenue. To the left is the Fox River.

(Heather Eidson/Staff Photographer)

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Yorkville as it exists today. (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning)

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An artist's rendering looking west through Yorkville. (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning)

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The scenarios, the architects cautioned, would range from somewhat realistic to completely futuristic, and to some, unfathomable. But the point, they explained, was to be open to ideas for a revamped, 21st century downtown.

But some of the basic suggestions for downtown were shot down by members of the audience. One scenario showed restaurants along the river so canoers and kayakers on the Fox River could stop for a bite to eat.

"Why would we need restaurants on the Fox River if we're in our canoes?" one woman asked. "That's why we carry picnic baskets."

Another scenario pointed out mixed-use developments of condominiums alongside a commuter train line on Hydraulic Street.

The questions continued.

"Why would anyone want to live next to the train tracks?" a man asked.

Another resident asked why condos were necessary at all in downtown? Designers then explained that young people in their 20s and 30s seek an atmosphere where they can get to work easily and live where there are places to eat and fun things to do at night.

And then came the most perplexing question:

"How do you know in 20 to 30 years if downtown Yorkville won't move to Route 34?" a man said.

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"Have a town square at Hydraulic and Heustis streets off Route 47. Put some restaurants and little shops along the river, and provide more parking. ... But you can't have condos downtown if you're trying to have more commercial." — Greg Freeman, owner of Freeman's Sports in downtown Yorkville



"I'd like to see it made more accessible for bikers. I'd like to see nicer, high-end restaurants, and a train would be awesome. We need to bring back the movie theatre. As for condos, it just seems really small downtown right now. It would be hard in my opinion to establish condos down there." — Laura Genovesi, Yorkville resident



"We'd like to see a combination of stores that can feed off each other, like a bookstore, restaurants or a bike shop. We need a system that would connect with other towns through trails and condo-type spaces for elderly to walk to everything. Even 'Music Under the Stars,' I could see that on the river." — Doug Kinsella, Yorkville resident

There were seemingly two sides to the discussion of downtown Yorkville: Either keep downtown the way it is and improve other parts of town instead, or reinvest in downtown and make it the center of the city. Getting the two sides to understand each other could be the hardest part.

But whether they like it or not, residents should expect to hear talk of "downtown Yorkville" in the coming months and years ahead.

#### Small first steps

Freeman's Sports, which rents canoes and kayaks off Hydraulic Street, has been downtown for about 40 years. In that time, not much about the area has changed, owner Greg Freeman said.

"There was a sundae shop, a furniture store, a barber and a hardware store down here. Now, we have a few taverns, flower shops and bars. ... There's no reason for someone to come and shop."

But there's a lot of potential for a booming downtown, Freeman explains. Out-of-towners who are looking to canoe or kayak on the Fox River make up the majority of his business. In fact, this Saturday, he is scheduled to rent canoes and kayaks to about 200 people.

Still, in recent years, more emphasis has been placed on development to the north, namely along Route 34. Because of that shift, Freeman believes downtown Yorkville lost its identity as the heart of the city.

"It's not (the center) anymore," he said.

But there are a few things happening downtown that are getting people to look, this time with fresh eyes. A kayak and canoe chute at the Glen Palmer Dam is expected to be completed next summer by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. The site, under construction since 2006, will include pedestrian paths on both sides of the river.

The city is working on a plan for a redesigned Riverfront Park to open not long after the chute is in place. Ideas include a new playground, connecting pedestrian and bicycle trails, a spray water structure for children and designated areas for canoes and kayaks, Laura Haake, city park designer said.

Accessibility downtown also is getting addressed. Route 47, which is the main artery, will be widened now that the state has passed its first construction spending plan in a decade.

For Freeman, Route 47 and the completion of the IDNR project, are major keys to jump starting downtown. "If they can do something with the riverfront," he said, "it would be great. It's an untapped resource."

As far as the downtown plans pitched in June by Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, Freeman just considered those drawings as far-fetched ideas.

CMAP, an advisory planning agency for the Chicago area, suggests strategies for growth and development for the region that hasn't been tapped to its full potential. CMAP chose Yorkville as a test market for new ways of development, specifically focusing on transportation, housing, water, education, jobs, air quality and other quality-of-life issues.

Its mission is to help communities grow and develop in smart ways for at least the next 40 years through their campaign called "GoTo 2040." Also on the books is the city's downtown vision plan that was created in 2005.

The 2005 plan proposes a community center facing the river. The center also holds a plaza with tables under umbrellas, lots of trees for shade and some open space off to the side. Steps lead down from the plaza to the riverfront, where pedestrians are free to roam and people-watch.

It also shows City Hall situated on Bridge Street, as well as a retail and performing arts center and flowing water fountains throughout pedestrian areas.

Lindsay Wagner, 23, is all for a more vibrant downtown. She wishes there were more to it and is surprised Yorkville hasn't caught up with other towns yet.

"For as much as we've grown, I think we could have more down here," said Wagner, a server at Kendall Pub on Bridge Street.

The next meeting concerning plans for downtown Yorkville will be Aug. 12 from 6 to 8 p.m. at the Kendall County Health Department, 811 John St., Yorkville. The presenters from CMAP will talk about transportation and land-use strategies, and the public is encouraged to share thoughts.

Freeman believes it's possible for Yorkville to change its downtown image, and business owners will support that. But the efforts for a more picturesque landscape will be slow and gradual.

"It's not going to happen in five years," he said, "but it may happen in 25 to 30 years."

