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A Riverside plan that respects and challenges

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Adopting a new comprehensive plan for the village's downtown area, as it did in mid-April, is a suitable close to Riverside's outgoing village board. While we have not always been enthusiastic about the currently configured board, we applaud the effort that brought forth this new plan.

The document was crafted, with considerable citizen and official input, by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP). Our sense is that this is the first planning effort in memory that really grasps the goals and aspirations, the worries and the limits of development in the downtown.

Most everyone agrees that what is in place now is not adequate. Downtown Riverside doesn't work well enough for current residents. There aren't enough businesses and the mix of businesses is uninspiring. The downtown also doesn't work as an economic engine to draw in visitors to help fund the community.

The CMAP proposal finds that elusive balance between preservation and change, between respecting our history and, yes, exploiting it respectfully. This is a plan built on Riverside's history that does not fall victim to the straightjacket of history that some in town seem determined to fit the village with.

The plan includes bold ideas that are fully in tune with Riverside's traditions and strengths. An expanded role for the Riverside Historical Museum centers on the truth that our Olmsted design and rich history are dynamic assets to be enjoyed and shared, not musty artifacts to be protected under glass.

Bringing life to the river side is another acknowledgment of the undervalued asset we have in our natural setting. Drawing kayakers and canoes, bike riders and walkers to the downtown is another way to make Riverside a destination.

Wider sidewalks to encourage outdoor dining is a great solution, whether you are a 30-year resident or a person lucky enough to have just discovered this gem of a town. Better signage that tells visitors we welcome them into our tangled web and can direct them back out at the close of the day is also obvious.

There are other ideas both bolder and potentially more contentious. A community/recreation center on the site of the old public works garage is an ambitious and worthy goal in our eyes. Streamlining village government processes to make opening a business here simpler and faster is just the right thing to do and should not be seen as giving up the ability to shape the business community.

With the CMAP plan comes a two-year stretch during which this agency will provide its considerable support and expertise to efforts to implement plans. Combined with an economy finally coming off the map, this is an ideal time for Riverside to move boldly ahead.