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New vision for Riverside downtown

Open house slated for March 19 at the township hall

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Are sidewalk cafes, a riverfront community center, a kayak livery, a water tower observation deck and bed-and-breakfasts in Riverside's future?

It's too soon to tell what the future will bring, but a new plan for downtown Riverside drafted by a regional planning group recommends looking into all of those possibilities to revitalize the central business district.

Nearly a year after first seeking input from the public on a new Village Comprehensive Plan for downtown Riverside, the planning group has released a draft of its final recommendations. But before handing a final plan to the Riverside village board at the end of April, representatives from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) are inviting residents to an open house on Tuesday, March 19 from 5 to 7 p.m. in Room 4 of Riverside Township Hall, 27 Riverside Road.

"I think it's a good work product," said Village President Michael Gorman. "It puts forth a menu of ideas for the next village board, along with residents, to pick and choose what type of ideas to pursue."

In addition to having an opportunity to take a look at the draft plan, residents will be able to give feedback to CMAP and village officials about the recommendations in the document. That input may find its way into the final plan, which the village board is expected to accept at its meeting on April 15.

"I like that it's based in reality," said Ben Sells, the Riverside trustee who is running unopposed for village president in April. "What caught my attention are the things we can do to improve the business environment."

Anyone interested in seeing the plan prior to the March 19 open house can have a look at the copy available at the Riverside Public Library.

"I think they're on the right track," said David Moravecek, president of the Riverside Township Chamber of Commerce, which had a steering committee of community stakeholders providing input to CMAP during the year-long process.

"The groundwork is there," said Moravecek. "I hope the [local elected] representatives we have take what we've got here and build on it."

The 72-page central business district plan is the result of conversations CMAP planners had with stakeholders, Riverside officials, and residents. CMAP conducted two public meetings, including a visioning session last August where residents gave planners a picture of the kind of downtown they pictured for Riverside.

During those sessions, a couple of key issues became apparent, according to the planners. Residents envisioned the downtown area as a lively and inviting business district with a diverse mix of businesses and restaurants.

Residents also consistently said there ought to be a stronger effort made to take advantage of the village's location on the Des Plaines River and connect it more overtly to the downtown.

"The connection to the river seems so self-evident," said Sells.

Some of the recommendations laid out in the plan a "shop local" campaign, streamlining the development review process and improve signage to guide people to and within the central business district.

It also calls for the village to actively market vacant commercial property and beautify vacant storefront

through art.

The plan calls for the village to throw active support behind such things as the farmers market and other existing events. In addition, it recommends expanding public events, particularly ones that draw on the village's heritage as a national landmark to boost tourism.

With that in mind, the plan suggests bolstering the Riverside Historical Museum by hiring a paid museum coordinator, seriously look at a proposal to create an observation deck at the water tower and consider moving the museum into the water tower pump house if a community center becomes a possibility elsewhere. It also recommends that the village support bed-and-breakfast establishments as a way to entice architecture/design tourists on weekends.

Gorman said he appreciated that the plan referred often to Riverside's historic legacy and emphasized that finding ways to incorporate strategies highlighting the village's landmark status was important for revitalizing the downtown.

"A real key is to capitalize on who we are and on our historic assets," said Gorman

The plan asks that Riverside consider "green" tourism strategies such as increasing bicycle and walking tours and establishing a kayak livery, where people can rent boats to take advantage of miles of newly navigable river now that Riverside's dams are gone.

Specifically in the central business district, the plan recommends widening the sidewalk on the south side of East Burlington Street in order to create more pedestrian space and room for sidewalk cafes.

It also calls for possible changes to the village's sign code to allow shingle-type signs to hang perpendicular from buildings. Long a no-no in Riverside, that is one suggestion being embraced by the local business community.

"You literally have to be in front of [a business] to see it," said Moravec. "We've got to address these nonsense rules we have."

Other recommendations include making the downtown more accessible from the south by making Miller Road a two-way street again.