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CONNECTION



JUDY McGOVERN
The Ann Arbor News

Whose vision will prevail in Ann Arbor?

I happened to call Sandy Arlinghaus when, as luck would have it, our minds were on the same thing.

Well, more or less the same thing.

What a coincidence, the former chairwoman of the city Planning Commission said, "I'm flooding Ann Arbor right now."

Now, this particular flood was confined to a computer model running in Arlinghaus's office in the University of Michigan's School of Natural Resources and Environment.

But Arlinghaus, who teaches mathematical geography and population-environment dynamics at U-M, worries that in the future streets and neighborhoods could be really, rather than virtually, swamped.

"I'm adamantly opposed to any building in the flood way or flood plain," she said.

Add that to the list of issues that will be under a microscope when, eight days from now, Ann Arbor's planning consultants present their recommendations for boosting downtown density.

And while I wasn't exactly thinking of flooding, I was thinking about those recommendations – and what's apt to come next.

Informed by public workshops, meetings with elected officials, real estate folks, representatives of various city boards and commissions, the consultants' report will suggest zoning and other changes.

But even among community members who accept the premise that growth is desirable, there are very different ideas about building heights and aesthetics, the mix of land uses, types of housing and the import of amenities like public transportation, parking, public and green spaces.

Reconciling those differences will test the skills of the "new urbanist" planners at the Berkeley-based Calthorpe Associates. It will, more importantly, test city leaders and residents long after the consultants have moved on.

It's worth remembering that the planning initiative began with Mayor John Hieftje who, following voter approval of a greenbelt program, created a task force to identify obstacles to increasing residential development in the downtown.

Hieftje plainly imagines a bustling, 24/7 mini-urban center – and sees it as a way of promoting a healthy economy.

There's plenty to support that vision. And the City Council and Downtown Development Authority, which contributed some \$200,000 to the Calthorpe project, are on board.

Still, it's a vision that necessarily revolves around upscale dining, shopping and entertainment opportunities and a demographically skewed population. Consider the picture of downtown Ann Arbor, circa 2030, forecast in Calthorpe's final workshop:

- Commercial space that's used less and less for office and more for restaurants and entertainment establishments.

- New residential units occupied primarily by retired baby boomers, U-M alum and young professionals.

- Continued movement toward Ann Arbor as a regional destination.

Not an unpleasant prospect, but not a description of a well-balanced downtown either.

Yes, there will undoubtedly be attempts to address affordability in Calthorpe's proposals. But, there's a limit to what's feasible. And it remains clear that addressing the obstacles to building additional housing on available site outside the immediate downtown area is vital, too.

Whether your primary concern is the floodplain, Aspenization or creating a greenway, it's safe bet there's something in this project for you. The Calthorpe recommendations are due Dec. 5. Stay tuned.