



## Suburbs import urban features to create sense of community

By Betsy Taylor, *the Associated Press*  
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DARDENNE PRAIRIE, Mo. - Right now, City Hall is in a doublewide trailer where the power just went out. But if Mayor Pam Fogarty has her way, a new municipal building, still on the drawing boards, - or, really, still in her imagination - will become part of a new chapter in this growing town's story.

The mayor and other supporters, with design help from a firm known for pioneering the New Urbanism movement in architecture, are planning a place to bring people together, where they can walk the streets and pass time, and where a sense of community can flourish.

Dardenne Prairie is getting a downtown. Once an agricultural community with fields of corn, wheat and soybeans and the occasional cattle farm dotting the landscape, Dardenne Prairie is located about 35 miles west of St. Louis. It is a stone's throw from the two Missouri cities that are growing most rapidly, Wentzville and O'Fallon.

Today, bedroom communities have sprouted in Dardenne Prairie's pastures, and franchise stores line the roads into and out of town. Its population has expanded by about three-fourths, from about 4,000 people at the start of this decade to nearly 7,000 in 2005, according to U.S. Census figures.

But, Fogarty says, her little city is missing something. "Everybody wants a third place. You have your work. You have your home, but everybody wants a gathering place," says Fogarty, a mother of five. Her reference is a nod to sociologist Ray Oldenburg who defines the third place as "a setting beyond home and work (the 'first' and 'second' places respectively) in which people relax in good company and do so on a regular basis."

Fogarty's vision for her town: This



Mayor Pam Fogarty envisions a downtown area with a proper City Hall, perhaps with a front porch where residents can gather. The new district will give the community a place where people can have "cookies with Santa and the Fourth of July parade," she says, envisioning a walking district filled with shops, offices and living space.

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"When you have a downtown, people say, 'There's Dardenne Prairie,'" the mayor says. And she knows exactly where they'll be when they say that.

The would-be downtown is 80 acres, part of it occupied by a baseball diamond that will remain, the rest open fields and a few privately owned houses. Several are rental properties whose owners are interested in selling, Fogarty said. The site's transformation into a downtown begins with town meetings in April.

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Dardenne Prairie isn't the only community seeking to establish a sense of place by designing it. In Storrs, Conn., the University of Connecticut has drawn notice for a plan to essentially build itself a college

town, with shops, restaurants, apartments, and even a traditional New England town green. UConn officials have said they don't know of another university that has attempted the same thing.

The belief that aspects of traditional neighborhoods can enhance communities has been growing with certain architects in recent years. After World War II, suburbs flourished. As many commuters moved farther from cities into housing subdivisions, their lives became more separate from one another. Homes were no longer down the block from the corner store. Offices sprung up in business parks. It became yet another drive to get to church or school.

In their book, "Suburban Nation, The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream," Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck criticize suburban sprawl and related development that appear to have only one goal: "making cars happy."

Duany and Plater-Zyberk are among about a dozen people credited with the New Urbanism movement. They drew much attention after developer Robert Davis

asked them in 1979 to design Seaside, Fla., which was inspired by aspects of small-town life. Now Dardenne Prairie has hired their firm, Miami-based Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co., to help shape its downtown and its future.

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Not far from Dardenne Prairie, a made-from-scratch community with the fitting name New Town is rising from fields that were mainly used for growing sod.

The 750-acre development, whose full name is The New Town at St. Charles, drew from classic city architecture, with detached garages in back of homes and including a church, a bookstore, a market and other shops with more on the way. Residents can swim, kayak and fish in manmade lakes with fountains and canals that are actually a stormwater system. Wide front porches and parks are intended to encourage neighbors to get to know one another.

New Town is pitched by its creators as “a return to the towns of yesterday.” Developer Greg Whittaker said he wanted to build a community where, “once you park your car, you don’t have to get back into it.” In all, 5,700 homes could be built in the instant community, with townhouses selling from \$120,000 and a couple of single-family homes topping out at over \$1 million. New Town, which is more than 10 percent complete now, was designed right down to its intricate manhole covers.

A sign at the center of the development displays “The Shades of New Town,” the 28 paint colors largely in use at the development. A yellowish cream is called “New Town Latte,” and a light green is “New Town Celery.” Whittaker says residents can pick their own colors to paint their homes, as long as they clear them first with the town architect.

There are other restrictions. Outdoor furniture can’t be plastic, for aesthetic reasons. Gas lawn movers can’t be used, an effort to reduce environmental and noise pollution. Venetian blinds facing the outside need to be neutral colors, and individual homes don’t have individual mailboxes. Residents pick up their mail at a mail center, a decision made in part to get people socializing and out of their homes, Whittaker said.

Several residents said they’ve found just what they were looking for in New Town. Peggy Riley, 56, recently had lunch at the Prancing Pony bookstore with her grandson, Will Statler, 3, before heading to a meeting with a couple of women from St. Charles Christian Church, also located in town. She said her family is related to



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eight other families that have opted to move to New Town. She loves how the community looks, but more importantly she’s very fond of the other residents. To many of them family is important, she said, and they like to stay active, taking part in church and social gatherings. “We really try not to leave New Town,” she said. “It’s like being on vacation. Why would you want to go out into the other world?”

An architectural photographer, Toby Weiss, whose day job is with a residential design-build firm, visited New Town and wrote about it on a blog. Weiss found it ironic that she had to drive “over 30 miles to deep suburbia to see a modern replica of my city neighborhood.” Weiss said she found it a pleasant place to visit, but called aspects of New Town like a movie set or Disney World. “New Town is the visual equivalent of the taste of low-fat Pringles,” she wrote.

“So we should have buildings falling down and graffiti?” Whittaker asked, when told some think the development looks a little too perfect or inauthentic. “It needs a little time to grow,” he said. “It needs a little patina.”

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New Town was planned by DPZ, the same firm that Dardenne Prairie is going to use for its downtown.

A DPZ team, hired for \$325,000, plans to come to Dardenne Prairie on April 18-24. They’ll hold meetings to talk to residents, business owners and other decision-makers and sketch ideas about their hopes for the

new downtown. To help fund the more traditional downtown it is seeking, the town used an unusual approach to development, first drawing some big-box retailers to generate tax revenue. A Target, J.C. Penney and Shop ‘N Save grocery store have gone in, as well as a multi-screen movie theater.

In 2003, the community sought to bring in commercial development, simply to raise basic operating funds. There was no city park, no way even to pay for a trash can, Fogarty said. She noted that she still cleans the bathroom at City Hall, where power went out temporarily during a reporter’s visit as utility workers relocated lines.

Over time, as Dardenne Prairie sought development, community members began to think more about the type of place they wanted to be living. A small group started kicking around the notion of a downtown. From there, aldermen passed a resolution, and two community hearings were held last year for public comment.

With more money coming in, the community thinks it has a chance to determine what it wants its future to be, even as it draws on its past. “You’re seeking to enhance a sense of place that hopefully is already there,” DPZ project manager Senen Antonio says.

Fogarty, the mayor, said a century-old Catholic church, with caramel-colored stone and simple stained glass windows, may serve as a design inspiration for much of the new downtown. Either way, she believes the community will get its needed town center. “You go get what you want,” she said, “or you wait for what comes.”