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What makes a downtown?

In St Charles County, several cities are tackling that difficult question

By Nina Kult
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Visit any town in America and there's a good chance you'll find a road called Main Street. Often, it's the heart of that town, sometimes marked by a railroad or a river, and a place where the community comes together.

Across St. Charles County, cities are investing time and energy into downtowns. They are evolving, being revitalized and redeveloped and, in some cases, being built from the ground up. In each case, officials are trying to create something special, an identifiable place where people can gather.

An evolving community

Forty years ago, the landscape of downtown St. Charles looked very different. "It was almost scary," Mayor Patti York said. "You had elderly living upstairs, homeless along the riverfront and children who weren't allowed to play on the road. It was a real rough area."

It took the foresight of a group of people to reinvest in Main Street and preserve the historic buildings. Four decades later, the downtown area is still evolving. Today, Main Street encompasses two very different sections that make up downtown St. Charles. South Main Street is peppered with antique shops and quaint restaurants whereas North Main Street gives off a cultural air with galleries, bars and coffee shops.

York said part of what has made downtown St. Charles successful has been working with business owners and merchants on a regular basis. In the early 1990s, merchants persuaded city officials to return vehicular traffic to North Main Street, which had been converted in the late 1970s to a pedestrian mall. The decision proved successful, as visitors were able to drive on the street and have better access to businesses. "You have to look at how you can make it work," she said. "That's what a downtown should be."

The New Town at St. Charles, Whitaker Homes' new urbanism development near Highway 370 on the northern edge of St. Charles, has its own "downtown" setting with stores, restaurants and other services, all within walking distance of homes.

"That environment, whether it's downtown Chicago, downtown St. Louis or downtown St. Charles, is the environment a lot of people like to see," York said. "New Town is keeping the neighborhood vibrant by providing all the services so you don't have to drive somewhere."

York said in the future, city officials will look at St. Charles as a whole and designate what areas, such as portions of Fifth Street and First Capitol Drive, make up the city's downtown district.

Whittaker also plans develop the site of the former Noah's Ark Restaurant and Motel into a retail and residential plaza. "It's always evolving," York said. "Always."

Creating a vision

Most Wentzville residents probably have never visited the Village Center or can tell you where it is, but Mayor Paul Lambi is passionate about changing that. Made up of both historic buildings and newer structures, Wentzville has struggled to keep a consistent downtown. Two fires, a tornado and demolition have claimed much of downtown Wentzville, leaving a patchwork of old and new.

Lambi said it's time to preserve what is left and move forward with a vision, that of Village Center. "The first thing to understand is all of downtown is made up of privately owned property," he said. "The challenge for any mayor or leader who wants to revitalize the historic district or downtown is to really create a vision that can be shared with other stakeholders in the area and get them unified on a common vision."

The Downtown Business Association, which Lambi said is growing in strength and interest, will be at the forefront of reviewing



Debra Hadfield, left, and Nancy Parker enjoy a cup of coffee at Picasso's Coffee Shop on Main Street in O'Fallon

visions for the downtown. "My vision for a downtown area is important because in my observance of 50 years plus, healthy cities all have very viable downtowns," Lambi said. "It's the heart of the city and gives cities their identities."

Wentzville has already taken steps to make changes that promote downtown revitalization, including a new overlay district for the Village Center. Additionally, city officials changed the zoning, which allows for live-work units. "When you think about it, that's what old town is all about," Lambi said.

One month after the new zoning was passed, an old downtown hotel was purchased and renovated into an office/retail building, and a number of properties are going through similar steps.

A program with promises

Julie Powers was driving to work when she heard a radio advertisement for a carpet store. "They said, 'located in Old Town St. Peters on Main Street.' I was so excited," she said. "That's exactly what we need." For Powers, director of planning, community and economic development for St. Peters, making more people aware of Old Town and what it has to offer is her goal.

Take a walk through Old Town and you'll see a patchwork of buildings constructed over the last 100 years. Powers said the city is looking to give the area a more consistent theme. After sewer work is completed, the city will beautify the area

with curbs, new sidewalks, landscaping and street furniture, giving Main Street an overall softer appeal. "With all that beautification, our hope is that we can become a destination," Powers said.

While many people consider the corridor that includes City Hall, the Rec-Plex and City Centre Park as the heart of St. Peters, Powers said Old Town is where the history is. "There's where it all started and there are still some original buildings," she said. "Many events are held at City Hall, and there is no reason why similar events can't be held in Old Town."

In talking with shop owners in Old Town, city officials discovered they wanted to not only make it more family oriented, with restaurants and shops, but add a night-life with evening activities.

Powers is working with project manager Mike Yerion and George Butler and Associates on design work on the Old Town enhancement project. "Our goal is to have a mix. We have a few restaurants down there now, mixed in with some shops, so we'd like to see that trend continue," she said.

Preparing for the future

Donna Morrow remembers taking walks as a child with her grandfather around downtown Kirkwood. She recalls being able to walk to the local convenience store, crossing the railbridge, visiting the park and having everything you need within a few blocks. It was the small-town feel, the Boardwalk setting and 'live, work, play' concept that attracted her to O'Fallon's WingHaven community years ago. "I like that I can bike to the Boardwalk, sit out on a patio and have a burger, walk to the library and pick up dry cleaning," she said. "It's one-stop shopping."

Now, as mayor of O'Fallon, Morrow believes there is a desire among residents to get back to that downtown feel. She envisions a place on the north side of town where residents have the same opportunities she had in Kirkwood. "Our downtown is not as historic as St. Charles, but I think we have the layout that will make for a good downtown," she said. "The things that make a good downtown are the ability to have services readily available on foot and to have a mix of some housing."

Two large-scale Main Street projects - the O'Fallon Station and the redevelopment of the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood property - will be instrumental in helping redefine O'Fallon's downtown. Morrow said the Sisters property, which will be developed into a commercial and residential mix, holds great potential. "What's going to be nicer is people my age who are moving



Construction crews tear up Main Street in Old Town St. Peters to make way for a new infrastructure. City officials are working on a plan that will enhance the downtown and will hopefully attract more businesses and residents.

from the house and yard, are easing into an area where everything is right there, and you don't necessarily have to get in your car," she said.

From meadows to Main Street

Take Highway N west past Wing-Haven Boulevard, and keep heading straight. When you reach the intersection with Immaculate Conception Church on the corner, you'll be in downtown Dardenne Prairie. It's not there yet, but officials are moving full speed ahead with a plan to build their own downtown over the next few years.

Representatives of Florida-based DPZ & Co., a group of architects and town planners that designed the New Town at St. Charles, took their first trip to the growing city this week. They plan to return for 10 days next month and start the design process, which would include gathering opinions of city officials, residents and business owners.

The process, called a charrette, essentially starts with a blank slate and allows professionals to work on the project with what DPZ calls the experts - members of the community. "We're giving everyone in the community who wants to participate the opportunity to offer their concept and vision," DPZ project manager Francisco Garcia said. "From day one, we start drawing."

The ideas will then be tested and the best will be presented in a public meeting April 25. Residents will then get to choose which design they like and decide what works and what doesn't. Once a design is selected, 25 standards will be set in place. No matter how many developers are involved in the project, all standards must be met, ensuring conformity and unity in the downtown. "It gives the community a large sense of assurance because they know what to expect," DPZ business developer



The Boardwalk in O'Fallon's WingHaven community emulates a downtown setting. Stores, restaurants and services are all within walking distance of the neighborhood's homes.

Senen Antonio said.

When Mayor Pam Fogarty talks to teens in Dardenne Prairie, they always say the same thing - there's nothing to do. Fogarty's answer? She envisions a town in which you can grab a slice of pizza, sit down with a friend and have some coffee or get an ice cream cone after the movies. It's a place where you can spend a whole day and a whole evening and not have to decide what to do until you get there, and a place that appeals to the entire demographic.

"What's a novelty around here? Nothing," she said. "We need to create a sense of place for Dardenne Prairie." For the past few years, Fogarty has taken great strides in helping put Dardenne Prairie - a town many still confuse with O'Fallon - on the map.

She expects a five-year buildout of the downtown, but said it could be sooner if the project takes off. The downtown will include a mix of commercial and residential sites on a proposed 80-acre site.