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Downtown plan addresses historic buildings

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By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

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Between 1982 and 2008, 14 historic buildings in Owensboro's downtown core were demolished, the Preservation Alliance of Owensboro-Daviess County Inc. says on its Web site.

But Gary Adams, a longtime Alliance member, is hopeful the remaining historic buildings will be saved by the new downtown master plan.

"I've been working for 30 years to see historic preservation and now it's coming to pass," he said last week. "I'm really excited."

After all, the Downtown Overlay District, a series of changes in the zoning ordinances for downtown, says: "Historic preservation is a matter of public policy. While revitalization of the downtown area is a high priority, it must be accomplished in a manner that preserves and perpetuates the history and heritage of this community."

"It is the city's goal to enhance the attractiveness of the city's inner core to residents, tourists and visitors and serve as a support and stimulus to business and industry."

But former County Attorney Bob Kirtley, who is now in private practice, isn't so sure.

Kirtley's 150-year-old law office building at 205 W. Second St. is slated to be demolished to make way for Market Square Plaza, which is to include space for a farmers market.

"They've talked to everybody on the block," Kirtley said last week, "but they haven't made any offers."

His great-grandfather, John L. Neicam, an immigrant from Bavaria in southeastern Germany, bought the building in the late 1850s or early 1860s, he said.

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"It was built before that," Kirtley said. "Then, my grandfather ran a bakery and ice cream parlor here starting in the 1880s. When my mother was a little girl, she lived upstairs."

In 1972, Kirtley moved his law practice into the building across Second Street from the Daviess County Courthouse. Now, he's hoping his youngest daughter, Amanda, will take over the practice when she finishes law school in a few years.

"You can't improve on the location," he said.

How is razing one of downtown's oldest buildings consistent with preserving and perpetuating "the history and heritage of this community"?

"The Kirtley Building is more important historically because of its long association with the same family than it is architecturally," Adams said. "It was not included in the National Register of Historic Places. That's based on more than the age of the building."

The problem, Kirtley said, dates back half a century.

"The Singer Sewing Machine people remodeled it in the 1950s," he said. "They removed the old storefront then."

Adams said anything over 50 years old is considered a historic building. That means even the changes to the Kirtley Building are now "historic."

"I have mixed feelings," Kirtley said. "I'm all for revitalizing downtown, as much as I hate losing my place. If it's a good solid plan, I can't complain about it."

But, he said, "I have some real concerns about a marketplace that's idle much of the year. I like to see people do something, but the direction they're going causes some concern. If I can see a definitive plan and evaluate that, it might be different. But I haven't seen a definitive plan."

Adams, who serves on the Owensboro Historic Preservation Board, said even though the plan includes "the highest standards of preservation" for downtown buildings, "that doesn't mean we can keep them standing."

If a building has become so deteriorated that it becomes a threat to "life and safety," it can still be razed, he said.

The Bates Building at 101 W. Second St. "is our No. 1 concern," Adams said. "It's getting in pretty rough shape."

The building, erected in the 1880s, housed the Bank of Commerce beginning in 1887. It's been empty since River City Church moved out last year.

"Today, you could tear it down and build a 22-story building there," Adams said. "Under the proposed regulations, you would have to maintain the character of the neighboring buildings if you tear it down."

The proposed zoning ordinance would limit the height of buildings downtown.

"In the historic district, it's five floors," Fred Reeves, downtown development director, said last week. "Along Veterans Boulevard, it's eight."

The ordinance includes property from the river to the railroad tracks on Frederica Street, west to Locust Street and east to Allen Street.

From Fifth Street north, it extends west to Poplar Street and east to Clay Street.

In most of that area, maximum building heights range from four to six floors.

The Executive Inn Rivermont is seven.

Does that mean the city will never again see a building that tall near downtown unless it's on Veterans Boulevard?

Not necessarily, Reeves said.

"Property owners could apply to the Owensboro Metropolitan Board of Adjustment for a variance," he said. "If a hotel was being developed on a restricted piece of property, it could apply for a variance."

But variances will not be easy to get, Reeves said.

"To me, it's a very exciting time," Adams said. "Very positive things are happening."

The Miller House, a historic mansion at 301 E. Fifth St., has been restored as a restaurant at a cost of more than \$500,000.

And the 160-year-old Smith-Werner Building at 116-122 W. Second St. is being restored with businesses on the ground floor and upscale condos on the second floor. The renovations are expected to approach \$1.5 million.

"These are indications of what we'll see in the future," Adams said. "We are going to have a superb plan to guide the development."

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