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Downtown overlays may spur, protect developers

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In Jay Narayana's experience, potential private developers of downtown Owensboro will be keenly interested in protecting their investments.

"It will be important to attracting investors to establish an environment where everyone knows the rules that we are playing by," said Narayana, a project manager with Gateway Planning Group, the company that wrote the master plan for the revitalization of downtown Owensboro.

Investors want assurances that all developers in a district will be held to the same standards, thereby creating predictability and consistency in the look and feel of the district, Narayana said.

To reach that goal and create the kind of vibrant downtown envisioned in the master plan, zoning overlays are being developed for Owensboro's core downtown area. The overlay zones will be considered for approval later this year by the Owensboro Metropolitan Planning Commission and the Owensboro City Commission.

Narayana is in Owensboro this week talking to groups that have a stake in the zoning regulations. She provided information Monday to members of We Are Downtown, a group of downtown business owners. This morning, she will make a presentation to the Owensboro Historic Preservation Board. More meetings and public hearings will be this summer as the overlay documents are refined.

One of the overlay zones covers the "historic core" and is designed to encourage preservation of structures in a two-block by seven-block corridor between Frederica and Crittenden streets along Second and Third streets. An overlay for the "riverfront core" takes in Smothers Park and Veterans Boulevard between Frederica Street and the RiverPark Center. The "riverfront edge" overlay sets guidelines for the Executive Inn Rivermont property, while the "downtown core" overlay has rules for the rest of the core downtown areas that includes City Hall, various banks, office buildings and large areas of surface parking.

Along Veterans Boulevard overlooking the Ohio River and Smothers Park, the zoning overlay will call for buildings up to eight stories, with active ground-floor use (restaurants, retail) on a "type A" street that leans heavily toward pedestrian traffic and a cafe environment, Narayana said. Other "type A" streets will be Second Street between Clay and St. Elizabeth streets and Third Street between J.R. Miller Boulevard and Frederica Street. On those streets, buildings will be close to the street to allow for window shopping, and sidewalks will be wide to make them pedestrian friendly.

"The goal is a better downtown, more vibrant, more businesses and more people living there and more economic development," Narayana said.

The zoning overlays will govern new development. Existing buildings will not have to change. Future changes to existing structures must conform to the new zoning regulation.

Downtown Development Director Fred Reeves said it will be important to make the zoning overlay requirements user friendly for property owners and that developers know the design standards are there to protect investment.

"This is a draft document. It can be changed, but it must achieve those two goals," Reeves said.

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