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News **NOVEMBER 29, 2006**

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 Double Take

It Won't Go Away

But it will continue to be underused and wasted if downtown continues unplanned

BY MICHAEL D. BATES

Just Your Style There is no end to the making of plans, and there are shelves-full of downtown Tulsa plans going back to World War II and beyond.

Sports In the '50s, there was a plan for the Civic Center and a plan for an expressway ring called the Inner Dispersal Loop. In the '60s, there was a plan for something called Tul-Center, which in the '70s turned into the plan for the Williams Center, the pedestrianized Main Mall, Bartlett Square, and Fifth Street.

Arts In the '90s there was a plan, now fulfilled, to reopen the Main Mall to traffic. Brady Village now has an infill development plan. The stormwater management plan, the Tulsa Trails, urban renewal plan, capital improvements plan, major street and highway plan -- all these have components that apply to downtown.

Music Last month the Tulsa Metropolitan Area Planning Commission (TMAPC) unanimously recommended that a new downtown plan, the Downtown Public Investment Master Plan (DPIMP, an unfortunate acronym if there ever was one), be incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan for the City of Tulsa. The new plan is now awaiting a hearing by the City Council.

Cinema The plan was developed as an extension to the planning for the Centennial Walk, which in turn was funded out of Tulsa's share of the Vision 2025 Downtowns and Neighborhoods fund. It was natural to extend the study of the best route for the Centennial Walk to include all planned and needed public improvements within the IDL.

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For a master plan, it's a pretty thin volume, and most of those 30 pages are a report of ideas that came out of the "Downtown Linkage Summit," a three-day meeting held in November 2004.

There are some thoughtful concepts in this section, but none of it appears to be fleshed out with the specifics needed for an actual plan. (You can find the document on Downtown Tulsa Unlimited's website: <http://www.tulsadowntown.org/imgUL/Downtown%20Master%20Plan.pdf>)

Only the last five pages of the document--five maps--appear to constitute the actual master plan which would be incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan. Three maps show completed, funded, priority, and recommended areas for street improvements, streetscaping, structured parking, greenspace, and urban renewal land acquisition.

Another map divides downtown into nine districts, including the four existing Tax Increment Finance (TIF) districts. The text of the summit report recommends planning downtown in terms of these smaller districts, rather than trying to capture the complexity of downtown in a single plan.

On that same map, five areas are loosely circled as "proposed preservation areas": Brady Village, the Blue Dome District, the 3rd and Kenosha area, the Gunboat Park area, and the downtown core (labeled the "Art Deco District"). It's unclear precisely what kind of preservation measures are to be taken.

Conspicuous for its absence is the plan for the East Village, which, for the past few months, has gone dead silent on where it is headed and what its next steps might be.

The final map shows the two main downtown entertainment areas (Blue Dome and Brady) and the major events venues (Cain's Ballroom, Brady Theatre, Jazz Hall of Fame, the BOK Center, the Convention Center, and the planned Route 66 venue at 11th & Riverside).

The point of the map is to plan where directional signs are needed to point drivers from the expressway system to entertainment venues and to help pedestrians find their way between venues.

It's useful as far as it goes, but there's a lot missing that should be present in a master plan that addresses the aspects of downtown that are directly influenced by public policy.

It's my hope that, instead of rubber-stamping it, the City Council will send the plan back for a more comprehensive treatment that includes these important issues:

The Civic Center: A huge chunk of west-central downtown is devoted to a plaza and public buildings which are not aging well. In particular, City Hall is one of downtown's ugliest buildings, a close second to the daily paper's Main Street frontage. Oakley Plaza is barren and uninviting, and the fountains are long dead. What should be done with it all?

The jail: Where the jail is now could have been six square blocks linking Brady Village, Brady Heights, Irving neighborhood (just west of the IDL), and the downtown core.

It is the place where Driller Park should move if it is to move downtown. If you are a thinking person with some discretionary time and a little imagination and love for urban settings, drive around the Inner Dispersal Loop a few times and see for yourself.

Instead this area has been abuse as a sprawling blight on its surroundings. Can anything be done to mitigate the damage? Shouldn't we have a long-term plan to move the jail out of downtown?

Street people: The poor will always be with us. And, until the complexion of downtown changes, the locations of shelters, day-labor centers, the YMCA residence, and soup kitchens encourage street people to circulate throughout downtown.

It may not be PC to say so, but their presence is intimidating to the people we're trying to attract downtown as residents and customers. City Hall, the downtown churches, and the social service agencies need to collaborate on this issue.

Streetscaping: There seems to be a presumption in favor of reducing the number of on-street parking spaces in favor of "bumpouts" and broad sidewalks. But the lack of convenient on-street parking may deter potential shoppers from stopping. Perhaps that presumption should be reconsidered. And is it better to spend more per block on brick pavers or to use plain but durable materials to get all downtown sidewalks in good repair as soon as possible. After losing a tire while parallel parking next to a busted curb last year, I know which option I'd pick.

Lighting: Many of the newly streetscaped blocks have antique-looking lampposts topped with acorn-shaped lights. They look pretty during the day, but at night, instead of radiating the gentle glow of yesteryear, these fixtures have high-wattage lamps that glare and glare in all directions, putting more light into the eyes of passing drivers and pedestrians than on the ground where it's needed.

Drive north on Main from Brady Street toward Cain's Ballroom and you'll see the problem. The glare of the acorn lights make it almost impossible to see the buildings from a couple of blocks away. And even when the lights are off, the tall posts prevent an unobstructed view of the historic "Cain's Ballroom Dancing" neon sign.

There are better light fixtures that are still historic-looking, but they don't create a visual hazard, and they save money because they don't waste light. Look at new private developments, and you'll see cost-efficient "full cutoff" lighting.

It's the government agencies, spending other people's money, that are installing lights that waste energy and torture the eyes.

Historic preservation: We need a plan with teeth in it to protect our remaining historic downtown buildings. This is long overdue.

TCC and OSU-Tulsa: These two downtown campuses are part of the public realm, too, although they aren't under City Hall's control. The City needs to work closely with administrations of both schools to ensure that their needs for expansion are met in a way that helps restore downtown's urban fabric, rather than destroying even more of it.

The downtown churches: While they deserve credit for staying downtown and preserving their beautiful architecture for all of us to appreciate, the downtown churches have damaged their surroundings for the sake of convenient parking. Government shouldn't meddle in religion, but the churches draw more people downtown than anything else on the weekends, and city government does have a legitimate interest in accommodating those downtown visitors in a way that doesn't turn downtown into an ocean of asphalt.

City Hall should convene a downtown parking summit, to include downtown pastors, office building owners, the heads of TCC and OSU-Tulsa, and city leaders.

The role of DTU: Downtown Tulsa Unlimited has played a quasi-governmental role for a quarter-century. The city contracts with Tul-Center Inc., which is controlled by DTU's executive committee, to spend the special assessments collected from downtown property owners on street cleaning, a parking shuttle, Main Mall upkeep, and landscaping.

DTU is often treated by City Hall and the press as the only voice for downtown property owners, but many downtown owners say DTU is too narrowly focused on the interests of office building owners. The city's relationship with DTU needs to be reconsidered.

Design standards: Zoning laws are as much a part of the public realm as sidewalks and streets. While the central business district is and ought to be open to all uses, there do need to be a few very simple rules relating to building form and the relationship between building and street to ensure that new development reinforces downtown's urban character.

David Sucher, in his book *City Comforts: How to Build an Urban Village*, proposes three rules of urban design to preserve and create pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods:

"(1) Build to the Sidewalk (i.e. Property Line): Create a strong 'streetwall' in which each building meets or comes close to the sidewalk...."

"(2) Make the Building Front 'Permeable': Connect the inside of the building and the sidewalk outside with windows and doors...."

"(3) Prohibit Parking in Front of the Building: Put on-site parking above, below, behind, or beside. Sub-Rule: Allow on-street parking: Stop-and-go parking is essential to real shopping districts."

There's nothing draconian about these rules, and most pre-World War II buildings already obey them, but without rules like these, expect developers to take the same site plans they use in the suburbs and reuse them downtown.

Downtown's future ought to concern every Tulsan, if for no other reason than the hundreds of millions of tax dollars that have been invested in it.

Our elected representatives on the City Council should insist on a truly comprehensive plan for public policy downtown to ensure that our investment is profitable.

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