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Town Center: From concept to reality

by Karen Keefe

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The Town of Grand Island is on the verge of a giant step — the creation of a real Town Center. Plans for that reality were approved on Wednesday and will soon be up for review by the Town Board.

When you look down Grand Island Boulevard, from bridge to bridge, what you now see is a collection of businesses that seems to lack cohesion. A smile with missing teeth.

Although there are many thriving businesses of different varieties, you don't get the same feel that you get in, say, Williamsville, Kenmore, Lewiston or Niagara-on-the-Lake. In those places, most would agree, a town or village personality expresses itself in themed architecture, signage and well-planned routes of pedestrian and vehicle traffic.

Geography, Aesthetics and Zoning

In Grand Island, some would say, there's no "there" there. The cohesion has been stymied by geography. Surrounded by the Niagara River and connected to the mainland by concrete spans, a commercial "spine" stretches from bridge to bridge.

Jim Sharpe says Grand Island's business strip lacks a "commercial core" and the residential support to provide a "critical mass." He aims to change that. As chair of the town's Long Range Planning Committee, he and his fellow members plan to create conditions that will enable a commercial core to develop.

Sharpe, in charge of all electronic systems for the Sweet Home School District, is a former town councilman, former president of the Grand Island Chamber of Commerce and an Islander for 40 years. Ironically, it was Sharpe who chaired the effort to adopt the town's Comprehensive Master Plan in 1994. Ten years later, he found himself heading the Long Range Planning Committee, the group tasked with reviewing and updating the 1994 plan. "It was a shock to me to be put in charge of a document you created."

The newer committee's mission is allow business to flourish in the Town Center while making a unique aesthetic statement for Grand Island. The proposal is an update of the 1994 plan and is consistent with the zoning code, updated and adopted in 2004. The Town Board will review two major portions of the Town Center plan at its May 7 meeting.

"When you look at Grand Island Boulevard, our town center basically is set from Webb to just past Fantasy Island," Sharpe explains.

There are two other, connecting business districts to reckon with: from Fantasy Island to the North

Bridge; and from Webb Road to the South Bridge. He said the Long Range Planning Committee has looked at and studied the use of all the land "from bridge to bridge, and how the business use would be handled from end to end."

The result is a planning tool called "a matrix" of permitted and special uses for town center business districts, North, South and Central. The document indicates where entertainment, retail, hospitality, commercial, retail, residential and public use should be permitted. It covers a host of business uses, from medical to manufacturing; from retail to restaurants; and from kennels to car washes.

In addition to the proposed matrix of permitted use, the Committee wants to establish design standards that would give a consistency to the architecture and landscaping, creating the aesthetic and scale of a village. "What we're looking for is consistency of view as you're going down the Boulevard," Sharpe says.

Grand Island Boulevard would have sidewalks and trees along its length, bridge to bridge, to create a consistent sight line. The trees would have a canopy appearance in the North and South Business Districts, and a lower, airy tree line in the Central Business District to create the vision of a more dense commercial core. Sharpe said new sidewalks and tree lines would conform to existing ones around Town Hall. He also said the town could seek grants to help accomplish the objective of sidewalks and trees. "Until you have a plan, you can't ask for a grant."

With the sidewalks and trees providing the consistency of view, the setbacks for buildings can offer a certain inconsistency, allowing for different usage. "We have now come up with a staggered setback on frontages," Sharpe says. Businesses can move back or come forward to the tree line. "In this plan, we're being a lot more flexible and creative by saying the line can shift."

The matrix and the design and performance standards were the portions of the plan approved by the Committee on Wednesday. The third portion, which Sharpe also expects to be approved soon, is the proposed amendment to the "Town Center" section of the 1994 Comprehensive Plan. Sharpe praised Committee member Frank Burkhart for his invaluable help in drafting the documents.

As to architectural standards and materials, gray concrete block is a no-no. Brick, natural and synthetic stone products and wood get the green light. Monochromatic color schemes are discouraged, but color palettes should result in a unified look.

"When big box businesses come into town, they will conform to the architectural standard that we established as a community," not with their traditional storefronts. Sharpe said this is also being done in communities such as East Aurora.

"Without standards " and right now there aren't any standards in place "the town pretty much has no powers but to allow their current construction look," Sharpe says. He points out that "Tops looks like a traditional Tops, and Eckerd's looks like a traditional Eckerd's. We had no control or teeth to turn around and ask them to accommodate our design."

Sharpe says, historically, a lack of standards, together with a lack of sewers, slowed development of a town center. The sewer system that was lacking from Staley Road down to Tops came on board last summer, and the standards should follow in the foreseeable future. "Now the infrastructure is in place for businesses to start arriving," he said.

Previously, businesses were discouraged from coming in because getting a plan through was costly and unpredictable. Sharpe said the new plan would set ground rules and clear debate over establishment of a business. "Now you have a more disciplined area to work with."

What's in store for the next decade? "I see the Boulevard coming more alive, I do," Sharpe says, adding that issues such as signage are still to be debated, but the Town Center plans are a start. "This is a huge step forward for the business community on Grand Island. Huge."

"It's difficult for me, as a member of the Chamber of Commerce, to encourage or promote the Boulevard when I know that there's so many hidden issues that are going to bite the people when they do finally come forward. " The one thing I wanted from the start was, "Give me a document that I can go into the business community and start selling.?" "

Sharpe says all aspects of the community have come together in the planning process - discussing issues ranging from traffic to conservation, recreation, zoning and planning. He says he wants prospective Island businesses to know that the town has a plan and a vision - embraced by the government and the community - and the ability to bring things together as a team.

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