

Palmer Gillis' vision: Redeveloping downtown offers many advantages

Written by Palmer Gillis
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I am a self-professed downtown Salisbury junkie and advocate. The redevelopment of downtown Salisbury, always a continuing work in progress, is a passion for me at a personal level.

There are three specific reasons: heritage, economics and environment. It is rare to find, as a builder/developer, these three principles overlaid perfectly in a single opportunity.

Our community is woven together by where we have been as much as it is by where we are going.

How a central core evolved is more easily understood when we preserve historically significant structures. Heritage and historic preservation are reflected in three dimensions as we repurpose older structures into professional office space and retail, or for use by governmental services, the arts, or entertainment and food services.

On a personal level, I have memories of visiting my grandfather at the Delmarva Credit Bureau, shopping downtown as a teenager, hanging out with my friends and family, and having my office in downtown for 30 years in my adult life.

This passion comes through projects like redevelopment of the former Feldman's building, which was constructed by my five-times great-uncle, who was a grocery distributor.

I am connected with the history and heritage of this gem of an area. I am now old enough to remember structures as they have evolved during the last 50 years. Others in my generation can do the same.

Younger folks see repurposed buildings in a fresh way, with an open mind, which makes it easier for them to adapt.

As a builder/developer, I take great enjoyment in seeing a finished product emerge in a functional way that makes economic and environmental sense.

Economics plays into redevelopment with a desirable and unique structure. Since our downtown allows all zoning types, it presents an opportunity to create structures offering mixed uses — office, food service, residential and the arts.

Downtown is a parking district. This means parking is provided — for a cost — by a central authority. A development's initial cost for parking lots is covered; the developer only has to pay a reimbursement, and it's pay-as-you-use. Even after adding this cost, effective rental rates are less than in outlying areas. Lower rents translate entrepreneurship opportunities for start-up businesses. Entrepreneurs bring dynamic high energy.

This can be seen firsthand today in the form of energy flowing downtown via young ideas and

enthusiasm.

Since property values have not kept pace with sprawl, this means higher rates, but lower real estate tax bills.

From an environmental perspective, these buildings are being recycled and repurposed. The added benefit is that our core area has existing infrastructure and services — water and sewer lines do not need to be extended; electric and gas is in place; and police, health and emergency services are already here.

This is precisely what governments — city, county, state and federal — should be promoting.

Most importantly, no additional outlying land is being consumed. Downtown redevelopment prevents — or at least slows — sprawl.

Inspiring to me are the individuals who had a vision: the late Mayor Paul Martin, Dick Henson and Pete Cooper, and, of course, my friend Bill Ahtes — all of whom saw — or see, in Ahtes' case — things as they can be.

Equally inspiring are the young folks who are working hard today and taking entrepreneurial advantage of the opportunities our downtown offers. They, too, see things as they can become.

Yes, some will fail and some will succeed, but both will have learned through the process. Our community benefits from that process.

Encourage this next generation — young people who view things with a fresh perspective — and be a part of their success. Their success is our community's success.

In the longer term, a bigger, broader vision for the core of our community stretches from the Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art to Pemberton Historical Park, through the Salisbury Zoo, City Park and our downtown.

When we connect those points, we will have created a living, breathing community that is pedestrian-, bicycle- and vehicle-friendly. The result will achieve our heritage, economic and environmental goals.

This is a developer's dream, and it is my dream for our community.

Palmer Gillis is CEO of Gillis Gilkerson General Contractors.

Salisbury visioning: New laws will help city in expansion

Written by Jeremy Cox Staff Writer

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SALISBURY — It's good to be a city in Maryland these days.

"The state is making it clear right now they want to direct growth to areas served by water and sewer," said Jack Lenox, the city's director of planning and zoning.

Translation: Country living is so 20th century.

In the name of preserving Chesapeake Bay, state lawmakers mandated in 2012 that rural counties divvy up their land into four categories based on whether they will be served by septic or sewer systems in the future. At its core, the law encourages a migration to developments served by sewage treatment plants.

Wicomico County has no interest in laying sewer lines anytime soon, said Lenox, who holds the same position with the county. So, cities — and certainly Salisbury, as the largest urban area — will be the benefactors of the law.

Development will continue to occur at the periphery of the city, officials say. But they expect state and local regulations to steer builders inward toward the urban core in coming years, reversing decades of development at or beyond the city limits.

From 1970 to 2000, Salisbury's population ballooned 56 percent. By 2030, the population is forecast to reach 40,085, a whopping 68 percent gain compared with 2000, according to the city's comprehensive plan.

If that estimate sounds overly optimistic, consider this: The growth-guiding document was completed in 2010, fully a year into the Great Recession.

"Salisbury wants to be where everything comes together," Lenox said.

And it wants to grow. The growth plan calls for nothing less than doubling the land area of the city — and then some.

Its "municipal growth area" would swallow all of the remaining unincorporated land within the Route 13 bypass from Coulbourne Woods northward. It also extends east down Route 50 on both sides to Walston Switch Road, parts of which have already been annexed since the comp plan was written.

The north end encompasses a broad swath from Brown Road on the east to the Westwood Commerce Park on the west, bounded by Leonard's Mill Pond on the north. The boundary continues south of Business Route 50 to the southwest, joining at Nanticoke Road at the intersection at Oxbridge Drive.

The southern limits would remain unchanged.

If all the land were somehow annexed, the city would grow from 8,900 acres of land to more than 21,000.

Even so, no building boom is expected. Of that potential annexation area, only about 2,300 acres are undeveloped.

Residents living inside those proposed limits shouldn't expect a knock on their door anytime soon. State law allows either a city or a property owner to initiate an annexation; however, incorporated jurisdictions rarely pursue annexation and instead respond to annexation requests from property owners.