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"Problems of Sprawl, Urban Decay Tough but Fixable"

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PROBLEMS OF SPRAWL, URBAN DECAY TOUGH BUT FIXABLE

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Author: Samuel Gruber

Two recent articles on the "new urbanism" planning process initiated by the Syracuse Onondaga Planning Agency have quoted me:

First as challenging one of Andras Duany's suggestions for Butternut Street, and secondly, expressing my disappointment that the announcement of the date and agenda for the entire week of "Settlement Plan" discussions and presentations was presented so near the event, and so selectively, so that there was little opportunity for those not already "in the know" to be involved.

I stand by both of my remarks, but I want to make it clear that despite these objections, I support the planning process that SOCPA has begun.

Duany's suggestion for the Butternut Street neighborhood (and it was only a suggestion thrown out for discussion) was the idea of holding different neighborhoods to different levels of responsibility for property maintenance and code compliance. While I do reject that specific proposal (but recognize it as the de facto situation now), I fully endorse the process from which the suggestion arose and I am certain that members of the Preservation Association of Central New York feel the same.

The best part of the Butternut Street sessions (and the other sessions, too) is the mere fact that they were taking place. Significant numbers of mature adults were actually publicly discussing the nuts and bolts of what makes the city work (or not work), and what would make it work better.

Onondaga County officials should be applauded for their efforts in tackling large planning issues. Problems of sprawl and neighborhood degradation are difficult but not intractable. Willingness to acknowledge them is the first step. I was encouraged that several city representatives attended the Butternut Street discussion, and I hope that the city will engage itself more fully in this planning process in the months to come.

Underrepresentation at the sessions does not invalidate what was accomplished, but it will if the planning discussion is not widened. The late announcements of Duany's visit precluded much grass-roots community participation. We need a broader coalition of city interests, including the American Institute of Architects, the Greater Syracuse Real Estate Association, the Chamber of Commerce, and TNT sector groups to be involved. And, oh yes, it would be helpful if our elected officials got more involved. With a new Syracuse Common Council soon to be seated, let's hope they will.

Butternut was the only older city neighborhood included on Duany's agenda, and it was looked at in a cursory fashion. The city needs to continue this discussion and expand it to include other critical urban arteries, such as West Onondaga, East Genesee, Seneca Turnpike and South and North Salina streets. We need not wait until Andras Duany presents his report in March to continue the discussion his visit has begun. Duany has introduced the community to a planning vocabulary, but we are the ones to provide the answers.

Developing new uses for sites like Butternut's Otisca building (former Onondaga/Ryan's Brewery) and

the Conrad Loos Building (former Kress and Kacey's Drugstores) should be top planning priorities - more important for the city's future than closing Clinton Square.

Throughout the process, we must remember that the real heroes of Syracuse are not the strip mall developers and franchise builders but the small businessmen who are significantly contributing to the improvement of the quality of life in Syracuse by investing in these streets and their neighborhoods.

Planners need to look to the proprietors of small businesses (as Dick Case recently looked to the Dibella family, proprietors of the Palace Theater). These are the individuals who protect neighborhood environments and serve community interests. Only by encouraging their efforts will Duany's vision of a more livable city become reality.

On Butternut this means supporting the proprietors of businesses, such as Lombardi's and Biscottis. On James Street we should celebrate businessmen like Sam Melfi, who has made his secondhand bookstore a destination for visitors from around the entire region, and David Rudd, whose antiques store attracts visitors as if it were a museum. The merchants on Westcott Street offer a unique mix of retail and dining in a pleasant walking environment that no mall can replicate. On North Salina Street, David Jenks, George Angeloro and other merchants are working hard to bring economic life to that wonderfully preserved street. What a national attraction Syracuse's 19th-century Main Street can be! Planners need to recognize the existing strengths of these commercial nuclei and build upon them.

Without better planning the city will never be able to compete with surrounding communities. As the city's main streets and the neighborhoods that they serve become more and more degraded, only the most noxious commercial activities sponsored by the most opportunistic developers will situate themselves within city limits. Any drive around Syracuse will indicate that this is already coming to pass.

Syracuse is a great place, but too often we cannot recognize the best of what we have. The city needs to preserve its historic character and offer a clear alternative to suburban growth, not a pale reflection. SOCPA and Andras Duany have given us an opportunity. As a community, we need to seize this moment. It is doubtful it will come again any time soon.

Gruber is executive director of the Preservation Association of Central New York.

Caption: PHOTO File photo PROPRIETORS of small businesses, such as the old Palace Theater, which has served Eastwood since the 1920s, are crucial to city enhancement plans, says preservation expert Samuel Gruber . No Credit Gruber