

Architects present a new vision for Hillsdale town center

By Lee Perlman
The Southwest Portland Post

Consultants from SERA Architects presented a proposed vision for the future of the Hillsdale Town Center to community leaders last month.

Paul Rawlowski presented a series of proposals for both public improvements and private development, mainly in the north end of the Town Center near the library and DeWitt Park, at the last of three public sessions at Wilson High School.

Also on hand were two representatives of the Portland School District, who spoke about possible development on their property on the south end of the district that could include a replacement for Mary Rieke School.

Rawlowski's plans for the north included an addition to the park, new

multi-story buildings, and a new north-south street connecting Southwest DeWitt Street with Capitol Highway. This last could be designed with "street and sidewalk all on the same plane – not so much a vehicle street as a people street that can accommodate vehicles." Rawlowski said.

Along Southwest Capitol Highway Rawlowski suggested a left-turn lane where needed alternating with a planted median. There should be improved pedestrian access at Southwest 18th Avenue and Sunset Street, he said.

Bikeways should be raised to the level of the sidewalks to permit "pro-time parking," in which parking lanes become traffic lanes during peak traffic hours. Although they are unlikely to be available for redevelopment any time soon, a service station and the Casa Colima Restaurant property both present major opportunities for redevelopment, he said.

Consultant Brendan Buckley of Johnson Gardner said that Hillsdale currently has a "pretty positive market environment – healthy vacancy levels, rent levels and property values. Some of the buildings are becoming functionally obsolete – there's too much emphasis on parking."

However, this also constituted an opportunity: "If you can get some owners interested, there are posi-



tive conditions for redevelopment." Another opportunity is the steep slope of the land near the library, which could facilitate underground parking.

Buckley suggested there might be opportunities for multi-story buildings combining town homes with various types of commercial space here. He conceded that these were long-term plans: "Currently, I don't know that much of anything is happening." However, he said, "A fairly ambitious dense development scenario is not out of reach."

This, in turn, is an opportunity for experiments in energy efficiency and sustainable development that the city is currently pushing, Tom Osdoba of the Office of Sustainable Development said.

In the past we didn't have to worry about these things "because we had lots of cheap energy and we didn't have to worry about greenhouse gas effects," Osdoba said.

A town center under development such as Hillsdale could be the perfect place to try such sustainable ventures as group composting, use of storm water for toilet flushing, use of sewers for heating, and an electric car collective on the model of Flexcar.

According to Osdoba, the average two-car family spends \$12,000 a year on the care and maintenance of their vehicles

Some of these ventures pay for themselves over time in a way that would make more sense financially if done on a mass basis, and the City would be willing to play the role of broker for such undertakings, he said.

For the past year the volunteer Hillsdale Working Group has been planning the future of the Hillsdale Triangle on Portland School District property between Rieke School and Wilson High School. Portland Public Schools' Doug Capps and Justin Devers praised the planning work that has been done so far, and pledged to work with Hillsdale volunteers, but suggested that this should await the district's own planning for the property, and said that this might be some time off.

Devers said that in last year's 21st Century Schools building assessment effort the district found "over \$1 billion dollars worth of deficiencies in district schools, and of this \$7.1 million were in Rieke School."

According to Devers, "There are problems in the roofing, plumbing and high voltage electric systems. It's the 17th worst school in the district (in terms of disrepair); it's pretty poor."

The cost of repairs are about 60 percent of the cost of a replacement building, "and in some states, if the cost of repair is more than 50 percent of replacement costs, the building must be replaced," he said. The building has

just 15 classrooms to accommodate 400 students. "This is looking more and more like a replacement site, but we don't know when, where or how," he said.

The district may float a \$365 million bond for repairs and upgrades, Capps said, and with the elimination of the double majority requirement through this year's Measure 56, they would not necessarily have to wait for an election year and the high voter turnout it would bring.

However, he added, the district still needs to set priorities as to where the money, once obtained, is spent first. Competing claims could be areas such as parts of northeast Portland where many families choose not to send their children to public schools, but could be attracted by "something new and shiny," or "prior commitments" such as Rosa Parks School in north Portland that was "built with borrowed money that must be returned."

Community activist Rick Seifert argued, "Did Portland Public Schools not make a commitment to use when they said, 'Grow your school?'"

"They made a commitment not to close it," Devers replied.

The district would need to decide whether to retain all the property it now has at the site, Capps said. The placement of the playing fields would be "a completely different process. Let's say you put in artificial turf. Would you want to put it where it's likely to be chewed up before the end of its natural life?"

Several people present expressed frustration with the prospect of delay. Rick Garfinkle commented that it was "not a good idea. We've been working on this since 1991. We can't wait until all your ducks are in order. How big will your buildings be? How many stories? We don't need to wait for the bonds to pass to tackle that."

Hillsdale Neighborhood Association chair Don Baack said, "I don't think the community is interested in waiting for the district to make a grand decision that could take ten years. There are a lot of low-cost or no-cost things we could do in the meantime."

Hillsdale board member Richard Stein invited Capps to stay involved. "If we work together, we can move forward," he said. "Otherwise, we have one foot nailed to the floor."

SERA's final report should be available online at www.portlandonline.com/planning/hillsdale by the time you read this, according to city planner Amy Koski. Rawlowski said they can be incorporated into efforts such as the upcoming Portland Plan or the School District's master planning projects, "at which point they will become real."





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