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Increase Quality of Life by Capitalizing on Richmond's Assets

By **ROBIN MILLER**

As an urban real-estate developer, I strongly support Richmond's new Downtown Master Plan. This plan received unprecedented public input, superb professional planning, and detailed transportation analysis — resulting in seven key foundations to address our city's future.

For the past 20 years Richmond has been losing population. While this migration resulted in explosive growth for the adjacent counties, it has come at a considerable cost to us all as a community. Today one of the biggest threats to our quality of life in the greater Richmond region is sprawl caused by poor land-use planning, resulting in the loss of farm land in favor of increasingly far-flung subdivisions and commercial centers.

This rapid expansion of the suburbs has increased traffic congestion, wasted scarce resources, hurt the environment, increased pollution, diluted our sense of community, and stressed the resources of local governments. It is a “slash and burn” approach to development that is neither sustainable nor advisable in this day and age.

In order to preserve and increase our quality of life we need to capitalize on our assets. We need to:

- Become efficient,
- Preserve our open spaces,
- Revitalize what is already urbanized, and
- Focus on our uniqueness, our core identity — our heritage.

The Downtown Master Plan is a big step in this direction.

Richmond's Master Plan focuses on the urban center of our region. It encourages pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use, mixed-income, renovated neighborhoods with an emphasis on sustainable “green” design, public transportation, and historic urban architecture. This type of development, which recently has become known as New Urbanism, is actually the “old urbanism” that downtown Richmond was originally built upon.

Downtown Broad Street originally consisted of

many mixed-use buildings with retail businesses on street level and residential dwellings on upper floors. The Master Plan supports this traditional combination of uses, and encourages increased density to allow for the development of much-needed affordable work force housing. The Master Plan in essence fosters efficiency and results in more diverse populations living together as a community.

But the Master Plan is only a step in the right direction, because it is primarily a guideline. Actual development is controlled by the underlying zoning. Examples of frequent problems under current zoning include archaic suburban-style parking requirements, lot setback requirements that render some properties unbuildable, and commercial restrictions that preclude any mixed use, such as neighborhood coffee shops and cafes in residential districts.

Current zoning restricts much of the spirit of the Master Plan. In fact, if the Fan District were to burn down today, current zoning would not allow it to be rebuilt the way it is. Because the underlying zoning often does not work for the new intended use, developers must rely on cumbersome special-use permits or rezoning to achieve the same outcome. Unfortunately, both options are very time-consuming, expensive, and unnecessarily hamper the efficient development of our resources.

During the past 30 years I have preserved historic buildings and rejuvenated depressed properties in five states. Richmond has by far been the most difficult city to navigate due to the old suburban-style Master Plan, the still-existing suburban-style zoning, and the cumbersome special-use permit process. During the past 12 years I have had to obtain seven special-use permits to revitalize distressed neighborhoods in Downtown Richmond, the Fan, Old Manchester, and the Museum District.

Adjusting our zoning to reflect the new Downtown Master Plan's vision would establish a coherent, long-term plan that reflects community needs and consensus. In addition, such action would decrease the need for special hearings and

would encourage more efficient development of downtown.

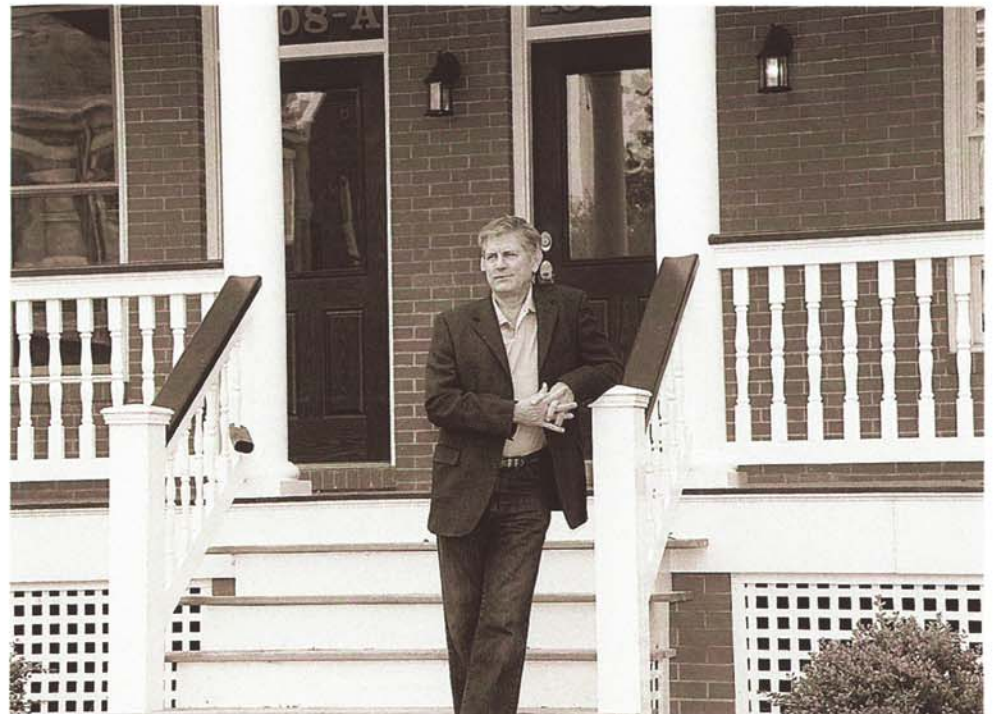
One concern that has been voiced regarding the Master Plan involves private property rights conflicting with the need for public green space and parks, particularly near the river. I agree with the need for more urban public parks, particularly pocket parks, but I also strongly support private property rights. If the city wants to expand green space and parks, it will have to purchase these properties at fair market value.

It would likewise be unfair to curtail the development rights of any property owner in order to maintain a public green space without just compensation. The city should be prepared to pay fair market value for any such restrictions. To this

purpose the city should establish a “Green Fund” for the future purchase of private property at fair market value to create more parks.

The new Master Plan coupled with urban-type zoning will help decrease sprawl and pollution, increase the population of the city, and improve the quality of life for everyone in Central Virginia. Furthermore, the plan's focus on preserving and expanding our historic and architectural heritage will make us distinct from other communities and serve as an economic engine for tourism. It will help make downtown Richmond into a more desirable place to live, work, and visit. Support the new Master Plan.

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ROBIN MILLER IN FRONT OF ONE OF HIS PROPERTIES, PORTER STREET FLATS IN MANCHESTER/JOHN CHAPMAN