

Public's appetite for a strong Hyde Park center is clear: Editorial

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(Photo: John Penney/Poughkeepsie Journal)

Yes, there is a sense of frustrating irony to it all: The degree to which the town center along Route 9 in Hyde Park can be called a “walkable community” is subject to debate, but there’s no question many people traverse along the corridor on foot and on bike and are thirsty to see improvements.

Slowly, the town is starting to deliver. Sidewalks are being added, and the town board has wisely sought federal and state grants for these and other projects. It secured a grant from the New York State Energy Research & Development Authority to undertake an intense planning process. And it hired a team led by Delaware Engineering and Elan Planning to gather information from the public — to gauge exactly how residents desire to see the community grow.

The public’s interest is palpable. A recent “open house” at Town Hall drew a sizable crowd. It went far beyond providing people with basic information about developing a “modern, walkable town center.” It gave residents a chance to offer their input, asking them to write on big informational signs about their housing and streetscape preferences along the corridor, and what tourist attractions they believe would best bolster the area.

Certainly, the town should build on a strong tourism foundation. It features or is in close proximity to many of the area’s marquee attractions. They include the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, the Vanderbilt National Historic Site, the Culinary Institute of America and the Walkway Over the Hudson State Park.

The town is updating its zoning laws, and redeveloping the core commercial area of Route 9 rightly remains a high priority. Bringing a commercial sewer system to the corridor also has been a long, arduous goal and is imperative to growing businesses in the core area. As is, each business or plaza operates its own septic system. That arrangement greatly impedes growth, has greatly impaired efforts to fill vacant storefronts, and does nothing to entice businesses that otherwise might have an interest in opening operations along Route 9.

Town officials and consultants are working on remedies, but first they need to define the exact area to be included in the sewer district. Ultimately, property owners within the district will have a vote. Some construction funds — including from Dutchess County and from the developers of the proposed Bellefield project across from the CIA — have been identified. But considerably more money is needed, and this is where state and federal leaders can make a profound difference.

As this process unfolds, tangible results can be seen, most notably the ongoing sidewalk projects in town. Sidewalks not only make Hyde Park safer for residents, they entice others to stop and visit, to walk around and shop in stores and eat in restaurants along Route 9. The focus of late has been on the east side of Route 9 from Quality Inn to Park Plaza, where the sidewalks are being improved, as well as the road shoulder for bicyclists. This follows some thoughtful work by federal agencies and others to improve the area to the south along Route 9, where better parking and a trailhead was built for hikers and bikers using Roosevelt Farm Lane, in addition to the enhancements made at the main entrance to the FDR site.

Over the years, many development plans have come and gone in Hyde Park and, quite frankly, the deep recession killed some of the most ambitious ones. But this latest planning effort, coupled with noticeable improvements, can build synergy and give confidence to private businesses and homeowners that change is possible. This is not a shiny, over-the-top approach. It’s a probing and methodical one. And it’s essential to the town’s future.

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