

Walk from the station to a ‘pocket neighborhood’ and a Not So Big house?

In the July / August 2011 issue, we reported on a developer in Libertyville, Illinois, who had bucked the troubles plaguing the housing market across the nation—selling 24 of the 26 house lots in an infill project in that village in just 10 months.

Now the organizer of that project—StreetScape Development LLC—is planning to build a larger, transit-oriented development in the same 20,000-person village. John McLinden, principal in StreetScape, has asked the Village to let him build approximately 350 houses and apartments plus up to three restaurants, up to 30,000 sq. ft. of offices, up to 10,000 sq. ft. of retail, and a potential farmers’ market—all on 16 acres adjoining a Metra commuter rail station.

McLinden is talking with architect Ross Chapin of Langley, Washington, about including one of Chapin’s “pocket neighborhoods” in the development (see May 2010 *New Urban News* for a review of Chapin’s book *Pocket Neighborhoods*). If the plan comes to fruition, 14 to 20 of Chapin’s cottages would be arranged around shared outdoor space.

McLinden hopes his project will also have a “Not So Big House” by architect Sarah Susanka, author of the *Not So Big House* book series. For his earlier development—an approximately three-acre project called SchoolStreet—Susanka designed a Not So Big Showhouse that was toured by 8,500 people. The 2,450 sq. ft. dwelling sold quickly. SchoolStreet features houses on small lots with what McLinden calls a “Front-Porch Revival” character, drawn from elements of bungalows and Craftsman houses built in the early 20th Century.

Having made a favorable impression with SchoolStreet, McLinden approached the Village about working with residents and the municipality on a plan for a downtown site near a Metra station that transports commuters to Chicago, 35 miles to the south. The new development is called Liberty Station because it would border the rail station and put retail and commercial uses on some of the station’s existing surface parking.

Among the proposed development’s components are:

- Two multi-level parking decks. One would be camouflaged on all four sides by rowhouses, perhaps rentals.

- A public plaza to be created behind a former municipal hall that’s now an American Legion post. An existing bow-string truss building in this area would be converted into a public pavilion, with an outdoor fireplace and with space for community events such as a farmers’ market and art shows. “It will become the ‘soul’ of Liberty Station and will attract people day and night,” says McLinden.

- Market Street, to be created on what’s currently a parking lot. The new street would have rows of decorative lighting draped across it, to help make it a magnet for people.

- A “permeable” design enabling pedestrians to circulate through the development on a variety of routes, including carriage walks, hard- and soft-surfaced paths, alleys, paseos (promenades), courtyards, and arcades. Transportation specialist Robert Cervero at the University of California, Berkeley (see article on parking on page 1), has argued that a circulation network of this sort can boost the use of rail service in its vicinity.

McLinden hopes to attract a neighborhood-scale grocery store, high-quality restaurants, a coffeehouse, and a few other retailers. Libertyville, 5 miles west of Lake Michigan, has major employ-

ers such as Abbott Laboratories and is becoming a restaurant/entertainment destination for the area.

A key component is about 250 rental apartments; they are “the primary reason the project is economically feasible in today’s difficult real estate environment,” he says. “Institutional money is available to finance the apartments. ... There’s a shortage of rental units in this country.” Detached houses and townhouses are envisioned to further diversify the project’s offerings.

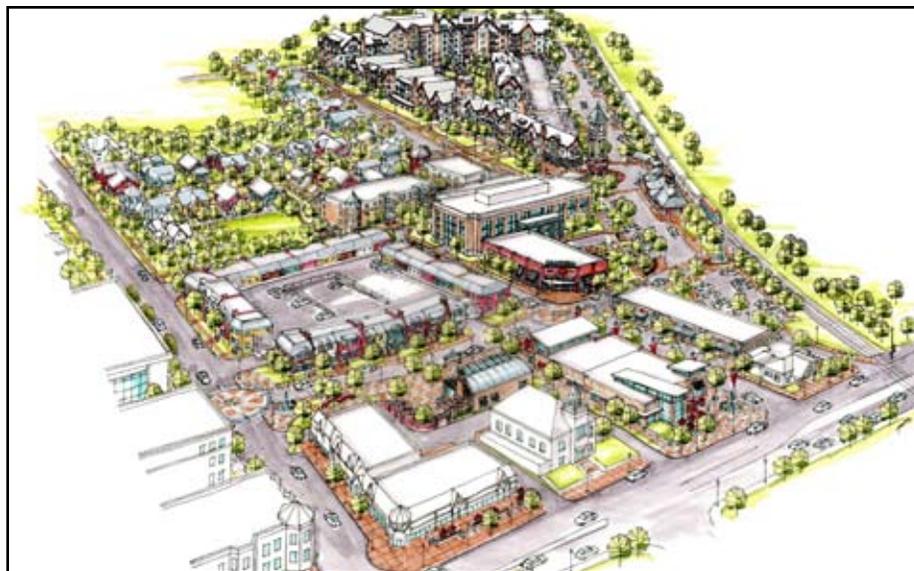
“A TREMENDOUS IMPROVEMENT”

Mayor Terry Wepler says the SchoolStreet project, only a block and a half from the Liberty Station property, has turned out to be “a big asset to the village.” This spring, Wepler convened a pre-application meeting in which McLinden presented his the Liberty Station concept to the Village Board and all the commissions that would be involved in approving or implementing it.

Wepler sees Liberty Station as “a nice transit-oriented development that would be a tremendous improvement for the area.” The two main issues, he says, are handling vehicular traffic and “making sure there is adequate parking.”

Seven of the 16 acres proposed for the project once contained a factory that left pollution behind. Part of the site might be capped to deal with the pollution, the mayor says. If the project, which is now in an early stage of the entitlement process, wins approval, development could start around the summer of 2013. ♦

Liberty Station aerial rendering



COURTESY OF STREETSCAPE DEVELOPMENT