



Lafayette residents pent up for urban alternative

Just retired? Just married? Just tired of all that travel every day? The 'urban' way could work here, but developers aren't biting — yet.

By Jason Brown

A study released two years ago to test the viability of urban housing within downtown Lafayette found considerable pent-up demand for both new construction and adaptive redevelopment of existing buildings. That demand still exists today.

Zimmerman/Volk Associates, Inc., which conducted the study, says that the market potential for new and existing market-rate housing units within the area each year consists of up to 2,590 households. Nearly 77 percent of those households would come from within the city and another 20 percent would come from elsewhere in the nation.

"Urban housing is attractive to

people of all incomes and ages and education backgrounds: young professionals, retired or just-married couples, municipal workers, teachers and UL students," says Hector LaSala, an architecture professor at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

An urban setting, like downtown, could offer them easy, walkable access to work and play. A good supply of housing in the area could also attract more residents and businesses.

When the results of the study came back, downtown officials hoped that developers would jump at the opportunity.

After all, LaSala says, the study

confirmed that "there are significant and diverse demographics that would choose urban housing as their preference."

However, the idea remains a hard sell. LaSala says he believes this is partially because Lafayette is a relatively young city, having been a town until not that long ago. As a result, the city never developed urban housing and opted to grow outward rather than up. In that regard, Lafayette followed a trend borne after World War II when the nation first began its flight to the suburbs.

That trend is shifting though, as people increasingly tire of long

commutes, heavy traffic and high gas prices.

"This is a 50 year phenomenon which has now hyper-evolved into sprawl," LaSala says. He adds, "This is an unsustainable development, in particular with the price of energy inevitably going up from here on out."

Within an urban setting, a short walk can provide someone with much of what they need. Add a decent public-transit system and one can almost do without a vehicle entirely.

Downtown living

Tom Sammons, a UL Lafayette architecture professor who heads up

the university's Community Design Workshop, says smaller cities have finally been putting this theory into practice and many have seen success because of it. He calls it a "quiet renaissance."

"There's a movement to rebuild our downtowns and rebuild with traditional neighborhoods adjacent to downtowns," he says.

Proof of the idea's viability can be seen in River Ranch, which uses the high-density, walkable community as a model. River Ranch's Main Street is the newest edition and increasing foot traffic has led to commercial success there.

River Ranch's developers also recently announced plans for a new development near Ambassador and Kaliste Saloom Road.

Steve Oubre, of Architects Southwest, says River Ranch was much more detached, single-family dwellings. Plans for the new development will rely heavier on vertical, attached single family housing alongside commercial developments. Oubre says the plans are to build up to four and five stories. Oubre says the project is moving along and they hope to bring the plans to

the city soon.

Oubre also says there is a huge demand for similar developments downtown.

"In order for (downtown) to be viable it has to have that component," he says.

Cathy Webre, director of the Downtown Development Authority, envisions a 24/7 environment and believes that offering more living space downtown will help bring in outsiders

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from other cities, regions and states. She pointed to the film industry as a target market.

Warehouses?

Among the issues facing downtown's development, though, is a lack of old building stock, such as the warehouses commonly found in larger cities. In other cities, these are always the first to be developed. Developers are also faced with smaller lot sizes and limited

acreage.

Oubre says larger areas are needed to justify the costs of such developments.

Parkview Towers, planned for Jefferson Street, is an example. The condominium development is planned for a small vacant lot between an existing building and a park. Construction of the towers has yet to begin, partly due to high construction costs.

Both Webre and Oubre say there were other developments in the works.

One includes plans for a residential/commercial development in the old Daily Advertiser building, which was purchased by Joe Noel. There are also plans for the old BellSouth building on Buchanan Street, although it is unclear how much residential space, if any, will be included.

Oubre also hinted toward plans for another four-story development with about 120 units in the downtown area. He says it was too early to release details

regarding the project.

Acadiana Outreach Center also announced plans to convert a warehouse on the center's grounds at Olivier Street into a mixed-use, mixed-income urban housing development named the Lofts at Olivier.

Valerie Keller, director of the Acadiana Outreach Center, says they currently are in the process of trying to acquire the warehouse with the help of local funds and a \$280,000 federal earmark appropriation that received bipartisan support from U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) and U.S. Sen. David Vitter (R-La.).

LaSala's third-year architecture students are exploring the site's possibilities and will assist one of the nation's leading urban-housing developers, McCormac Baron Salazar, on the project.

LaSala says their dream is to turn the warehouse portion into a mix of art galleries, studios and shops while keeping it as a community-gathering spot. They would then turn the top three or four stories into urban housing with 50 percent offered at market rate and the others available as affordable housing. ■