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Article published Feb 7, 2005

Fort Myers' Smart Code not very intelligent

• The character and scale of downtown Fort Myers are threatened by the city's plans to allow over-sized towers, exposed parking garages and inadequate public access.

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**By BILL SPIKOWSKI,
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS**

The Fort Myers City Council will soon adopt a new zoning code to guide the future of downtown. Known as "the Smart Code," this code is anything but smart.

For a preview of what this code would allow, witness the string of approvals recently granted by the City Council or Planning Board.

Seven new high-rise projects ranging between 25 and 34 stories have already been approved "outside the bridges" but within the downtown planning area. Two more projects totaling over 1,200 units have been approved on the river east of Billy's Creek.

These towers may be at home in Manhattan or along Florida's east coast, but they will be radically at odds with the character and scale of Fort Myers.

The irony is that city officials proclaim these towers to be expressions of the downtown master plan prepared in 2002 by Andres Duany and his talented staff, a plan that was enthusiastically supported by most of the 1,500 local residents who participated in the planning process.

One tower slab, known as the Vue, can only be built because city officials are selling the developer the western edge of our beloved Centennial Park. Compare this to Duany's recommendation that the city buy the Vue developer's substandard lot and expand this park to its natural western waterfront.

Space allows only a few examples of how the proposed Smart Code will continue this pattern of disregarding the letter and spirit of the downtown plan.

The plan says that density matters less than building form. Riverfront buildings outside the bridges would be limited to 18 stories (up from Duany's original recommendation of about half that height). Parking garages would be completely hidden from view. Public access to the river would be frequent and, some day, continuous along the waterfront.

What does the Smart Code say? Buildings can be 18 stories along the river, but can go as much higher as a developer desires to accommodate luxury condos of enormous size and parking garages with twice as many parking spaces as anticipated by the plan.

Developers can qualify for these height "bonuses" through minor contributions to hurricane shelter or affordable housing funds, or by satisfying a laundry list of other subjective factors that are graded generously. Water views or actual access are not required.

Compare this to downtown West Palm Beach, where developers can build five stories and qualify for bonuses of one to three more stories if they provide housing over shops, or usable public spaces. These bonuses are modest and they benefit the city as much as the developers.

In the historic core of downtown Fort Myers (between the bridges), our downtown plan contains the most attention to detail. Most vacant property not owned by government could have mixed-use buildings from two to five stories in height, never taller than six stories.

The specific vision for the Exhibition Hall site and adjoining properties on Edwards Drive was similar. The mixed-use buildings would be four to six stories tall. All parking garages would be hidden by "liner buildings." This concept can be seen in the widely reproduced drawing from the front cover of the plan.

The downtown plan envisioned the adaptive reuse of the Exhibition Hall as part of a mid-rise hotel complex, with retail and public open space along the riverfront, including the relocated sailing club.

When city officials later offered this site to potential developers, the city specified a height of 12 stories — twice what Duany had recommended — and then received proposals ranging in height from 12 to 18 stories.

How are high-rises and exposed parking garages supposed to enhance the historic charm of downtown Fort Myers? The city seems poised to again ignore Duany's oft-repeated warning to not act like a beggar. The city has its precious riverfront property to exchange — but only once!

Even a casual look at the downtown plan for Fort Myers shows why the public was enthusiastic: public walkways along the river; outdoor dining; housing mixed with shops and offices; wide sidewalks; and fully concealed parking garages.

What does the Smart Code say about these features? Not enough. If they're not required of developers, should we expect developers to provide them? Occasionally, but exceptions won't create a great downtown.

If you want to know what's in store for our riverfront, drive the beaches from Fort Lauderdale to Miami and imagine their towering new oceanfront buildings walling off the Caloosahatchee.

A few may consider such buildings to be art objects; others imagine a dramatic urban skyline; and many are eager for the construction jobs or tax revenue.

But no one can say the approval of these buildings provides much

confidence that our future will resemble the charming character of downtown Fort Myers or the vision of its future formulated by Andres Duany.

— Bill Spikowski is a planning consultant based in Fort Myers and serves on the Fort Myers Planning Board.

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