

The heart of Hyde Park: Democrats discuss the future of our town

BY PAT DREVENY

The hottest topic in Hyde Park must be economic development. It's an essential goal, but the devil is in the details. Are we talking about bringing a supermarket and other needed businesses to the heart of town, or giving up on the town center in favor of big-box development across from the Culinary Institute to serve Poughkeepsie? Tough times call for smart choices that strengthen our town, not quick fixes that may weaken it.

It's tempting to think that any growth is good growth, and some leaders would like us to unquestioningly welcome any store or subdivision that wants to build in Hyde Park. Sounds nice, but it's risky. If simply building tract houses and malls brought lower taxes, Long Island and Westchester would have the lowest taxes around! Megastores mean certain death for locally owned businesses, and often a double whammy: behemoth big boxes that sit empty after the next economic downturn. Not to mention housing that contributes less in taxes than it demands in services, vast swaths of pavement that funnel floodwater into our streams, more traffic and less town identity.

Hyde Parkers love many things about our town – wonderful neighbors, quality schools, world-class parks and trails, natural beauty ... the list goes on. Their complaints, while very valid, are more limited – empty storefronts, costly school taxes and limited shopping.

These problems are not simple to fix, but it can be done. Committing to strengthening the core of our town must be a top priority.

Hyde Park's shops and plazas provide residents with the products and services we need every day – plus delicious meals. In the main commercial center, Route 9 south of Pinewoods Road, local businesses provide walkable shopping and access to medical and professional services. These shops, in turn, provide income for their owners, jobs for residents and taxes for the town.

Despite the bleak economy, businesses are opening and expanding in Hyde Park. In the last four years, Hyde Park gained a hardware store – the family-owned Williams Lumber – plus a new Thai restaurant that filled an ages-empty eyesore, and a bakery on Route 9G. Emergency One, Children's Medical Group, Awesome Specialty Foods, Hyde Park Pizza, the Route 9G Dunkin Donuts, Rita's Ices, Quilted Bear Den and Aqua Jet were among the many new businesses to recently open or renovate storefronts. Soon, Stop & Shop will breathe new life into the tired "Ames plaza."

Growth like this provides a greater variety of goods and expands our tax base. We need more of it! But in addition to the hard work of entrepreneurs, we also need government to look out for residents' needs.

Many fear that in the new town board's haste to attract any development, they could ignore our established center in favor of big-box growth to the south. Those who remember the vitality of Poughkeepsie's downtown before the advent of its malls must urge the town board to think carefully about what kind of growth should occur in an area far outside the heart of the community. Giant chain stores can turn the local economy on its head, sucking out more than it contributes in taxes. Being a business-friendly community means more than courting Sam Walton's empire; it means remaining committed to the people who made their investments years ago and have hung on through thick and thin.

Strengthening the town center is a better solution, which is why it's at the heart of Hyde Park's Comprehensive Plan. Why? A stronger downtown would:

- Put money in the hands of local business owners (and their fairly paid employees), not out-of-town corporations

- Provide accessible shopping for families and elderly residents

- Contribute taxes to the town

- Demand less in town services by using existing roads and utilities (versus creating more areas to plow and patrol)

- Entice the millions of tourists visiting our famous sites to stay overnight, shop and eat here

- Help businesses succeed by putting them close to their customers

- Allow people to park and shop in several places without moving their cars

- Preserve the environment by infilling already-developed areas instead of paving over forests and streams

We're not talking about recreating the quaint downtowns of Rhinebeck or Millbrook. That's not what Hyde Park is about. Our modern, plaza-style downtown could simply be enhanced to better serve residents and tourists alike.

Progress means carefully choosing what to preserve and what to leave behind as we move forward. Democrats believe everyone should have a voice in those choices. We hope those who have been entrusted with town council seats will represent all their constituents and make choices that strengthen, not degrade, the heart of Hyde Park.

Future columns will take a hard look at the future of our town. Agree with what you read? Disagree? We want to hear from you. hydeparkdems@gmail.com.

Pat Dreveny is chairwoman of the Hyde Park Democratic Committee. We encourage our readers to send us columns to be considered for publication. E-mail columns, as well as letters to the editor, to editorial@thehudsonvalleynews.com.