

### **A Plan for New Brunswick**

New Brunswick's resurgence has not come without conflict, and more is likely to follow in the wake of the city's latest redevelopment plan, which was unveiled to this paper Thursday. On the whole, however, residents of the city – indeed the region- should be gratified that New Brunswick's municipal leaders are looking forward with vision and enthusiasm. If they can accomplish what they say they can, New Brunswick seems destined to continue to reassert its central role in Middlesex County, an ever more vibrant magnet for commerce, industry, medicine, government and, most important, young families.

That does not mean the new plan is perfect or all-encompassing, nor that its success is guaranteed. But as citizens review its proposals over the next several weeks and months, they should take a broad view. The purpose of the plan is to create a vision that moves the city forward for all its members. Certainly officials need to be sensitive to the needs and desires of the city's highly diverse population, but the plan creates an important starting point and should not be rejected out of hand.

Having said that, there are many specifics to applaud in the proposal. One of those is to open up the city's warren of confusing and often-empty streets. The plan calls for tearing down the massive Ferren Parking Deck, a cavelike structure that not only blocks direct access to the train station from the courthouse and theater district but also serves to hollow out the downtown. The new Spring Street would become a boulevard, friendly to both pedestrians and drivers. The plan also envisions a downtown park, creating a gathering spot of green.

Another encouraging piece of the plan is a move to direct Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital's growth downtown, away from residential areas to the north and west, and away from French Street.

The plan also calls for opening up the area around the train station, so it becomes a vital center. Architects hope to make this plaza more friendly to pedestrians and perhaps even to create a market area.

There is some concern that the plan – which calls for a great deal of new construction – will destroy some of the qualities that make New Brunswick unique, although officials already have vowed to keep the long-standing Court Tavern where it is and have expressed confidence that French Street, which falls outside of the targeted redevelopment zone, will retain the character and quirky blend of shops. Although there is little doubt that officials will be looking for national chains to anchor new buildings – many of which call for retail space – they say they are committed to maintaining space

for mom-and-pop stores, and for stores that are accessible to residents of all income ranges.

Other than a single 150- to 250-unit apartment building, the plan does not address housing. To be fair, much of the \$300 million worth of development in progress in the city is residential, but that is mostly on the upper end of the price scale (the exception is at the other end – the ongoing Hope VI public-housing project). Officials hope burgeoning office complexes will draw an equal number of new residents, which is a good thing. But almost inevitably, this will place pressure on the city's many working-class residents. There is already a shortage of housing, especially affordable housing, in the city, and spiraling demand will only exacerbate the situation.

While the city should do all in its power to attract new families to its outlying neighborhoods, it needs to be aware of this potential downside. It also must reckon with the fact that much of its housing stock is old and in need of rehabilitation. Hopefully, officials, who have taken pains to ease nonresidential pressures on neighborhoods, will also focus on the needs of the buildings, and people, within the neighborhoods. A truly resurgent city will not be accomplished only with a revitalized downtown.

All in all, however, it is a propitious moment for New Brunswick. And citizens should be encouraged to add their voices, and their ideas, to the vision taking shape at City Hall.