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'Mixed-Use Districts' Often Get Mixed Reviews

Manassas's Residential-Retail Plan Worries Some

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Old Town Manassas gives residents one of the few places in the city where they can leisurely stroll and shop. That could soon change now that Manassas officials have approved the city's first "mixed-use district."

Developers have already proposed creating a self-contained community, called Hastings Marketplace, in the southern part of the city. On about 30 acres and about a half-mile wide, the development would be divided in two -- half residential, with single family homes and townhouses, and half commercial, with a chain grocery store, a couple of banks and some restaurants.

Such town centers, as they're called, are designed to allow the people who live there to conveniently find all their needs in one place and walk around comfortably, similar to traditional historic downtowns and city centers.

"You're going to end up seeing more of these, especially in these suburban locations," said Ed Tombari, a land-use planner with the National Association of Home Builders, a trade association that promotes housing. "A lot of these suburban cities are scrambling to get these laws on the books so that developers can get these projects."

But such town centers don't always succeed, according to some academics, "smart growth" advocates and even the so-called "new urbanists" who advocate for denser development and a return to traditional city centers.

Some town centers are too exclusive and are basically enclosed communities with no civic parks, public space or income diversity, these critics say. Others are "mixed use" in name but end up being compact versions of suburban development. An increasingly popular type, called a "lifestyle center," is an open-air mall that only seems like a livable community, detractors say.

The developer for the Hastings project declined to discuss specifics of the plan, saying that it is still early in the approval and development process. There still must be public hearings and a close review by the Manassas planning office, after which the proposal goes to the City Council for approval or rejection.

"I think it would be beneficial to bring in more economic development for the city," said City Council member Jackson H. Miller (R). "We do want to be available to offer more to the commercial community."

Despite the enthusiasm for such places on the part of many city planners, some mixed-use districts in the Washington region have fallen short of being true town centers, some academics and smart growth advocates say.

"Some of them are just a different format of sprawl," said Emily Talen, an associate professor of urban planning at the University of Illinois.

"It's like selling nostalgia. People are trying to re-create, in a kind of Disney-esque way, the essential form of the urban environment," said Talen, who recently completed a book, "New Urbanism and American Planning: The Conflict of Cultures."

Hastings Marketplace recalls some aspects of a traditional main street. A narrow street cuts through the development,

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and preliminary plans call for the street to have lofts on the upper floors.

The commercial space features a large parking lot and "big box" store, but it also has shared parking, which new urbanist planners say is essential to creating a community feel. The parking is also behind the main street, instead of being sandwiched between pedestrians and the front door. But the development separates most of its residential space from its retail area, and that runs counter to the ideals many town-center advocates espouse.

"You don't want to just say it's a mixed-use town center and hang it on a suburban development," said Barry Carpenter, urban and community designer with Sympoetica, which has designed a few town center developments in Virginia and elsewhere. "What you want to do is not separate uses but integrate uses."

Developments in the area that regularly receive praise from those advocating town-center developments include Kentlands in Gaithersburg, which is an older example of a community that fought for a small-town feel with pedestrian-friendly streets and no big box stores. Columbia Pike in Arlington is cited as another example.

Public space, experts say, is crucial, so that people will go to the communities for leisurely activities, bringing life into a development. Public transit is another good way to bring in visitors.

"You have to cast a pretty critical eye on some and ask, 'Is this something more than a reconfigured shopping center? Is there something like real public space there, where people can do something even if they weren't shopping there?'" said Chuck Bohl, a professor at the University of Miami School of Architecture.

"I tend to view these things as transitional developments," said James Howard Kunstler, who has written several books on suburbia, sprawl and economics. "They represent a recognition that we have to do things differently, but they're still very much hostage to our current habits and practices, including excessive motoring."

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