

PUBLIC LIFE

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Advocate



Planning commission staff finds Pleasant Valley Road hospital site “questionable”

Connector road will likely require traffic signal on Bypass

On September 10, the Owensboro Metropolitan Planning Commission (OMPC) made a favorable recommendation to the city commission in response to a proposal from Owensboro Medical Health System (OMHS) to change the zoning for the site proposed for a new hospital from I-2 Heavy Industrial and I-1 Light Industrial to P-1 Professional/Service.

OMHS proposes a new 442-bed hospital on a 147 acre site on Pleasant Valley Road east of the U.S. 60 Bypass. OMHS proposes to borrow up to \$575 million to build a \$385 million facility, while retaining, adapting or selling various facilities on its existing campus.

However, in an August 13 report, the OMPC staff acknowledged that the recommendation occurred “because the proposal is in compliance with the community’s adopted Comprehensive Plan... the use of the subject property as a critical health care facility for the community is questionable.”

The OMPC staff set forth the following concerns...

“(lack of) proximity to the bulk of the population in the community”

“proximity to the railroad tracks and switching yard”

“proximity to hazardous chemical storage in the area”

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Miller House restoration raises the bar

“Relocation of the centrally located hospital will alter the neighborhood of the proposed location and will alter the neighborhood of the existing hospital while promoting sprawl...”

The approval of the OMHS proposal is subject to the following transportation improvements:

“At the intersection of U.S. 60 East and Daniels Lane, install a third northbound approach lane...”

“At the intersection of Daniel’s Lane and (an access point) south of the railroad crossing, provide a right turn lane or a 300-foot radius curve...”

“Widen Daniels Lane...(with) three 12-foot lanes and a two-foot curb and gutter... (and add) sidewalks...a 50-foot northbound left turn lane...”

“Install an upgraded and widened railroad crossing”

“Widen Pleasant Valley Road...consisting of three 12-foot lanes and a two-foot curb and gutter... (and add) sidewalks...”

“Maintain the reconstructed roadway above the 100 year floodplain...”

“Provide a northbound right-turn lane or a 300-foot radius curve for a one-lane entry road...”

“Implement a way-finding signage program on U.S. 60 East, U.S. 60 Bypass and the expressway connector...”

“In addition... the necessity of the expressway connector road or the Northeast Expressway construction is reinforced....The expressway connector road will likely require a traffic signal on the U.S. 60 Bypass.”

“Without the recommended roadway improvements and connection to the bypass complete, the hospital site will not function properly.”

The option of building on or near the current campus

According to OMHS CEO Jeff Barber, 16 site options were analyzed by consultants based on 18 criteria. The Pleasant Valley Road site was selected through that process.

In recent years, OMHS has acquired dozens of properties near the existing campus that could accommodate considerable growth. It would be more economical to raze the outdated sections on the existing campus and replace those areas with new facilities. This is not a preferred option, according to Barber, who cites other shortcomings of the existing campus layout: walking distance for nurses, nearby busy streets, railroads, flooding, restrictions on building over sewers, and more.

Some citizens have countered: at many hospitals, street-level traffic is overcome with upper-level pedestrian walkways; there are more railroads, plus a switching yard, near the proposed site; the proposed site is in the flood plain and will require retention basins and roads to be elevated above the 100-year flood level; the circulation issue and walking distance for nurses must not be a significant impediment to care or OMHS would not have been ranked in the top five percent nationally in terms of quality of care.

From here

The rezoning of the hospital site will become final in 21 days (October 1) unless an appeal is filed. If an appeal is filed, it will be forwarded to the Owensboro City Commission. At a date to be determined, OMHS will request that OMPC and the Board of Adjustments approve a conditional use permit and a site development plan.

Citizen concerns

Citizens have expressed concerns over the cost of the project, the cost of transportation and infrastructure improvements, and the impact of such costs on hospital rates and fees. Citizens are asking which projects will be the responsibility of OMHS, OMU, state or local governments. Citizens are urging officials to allow the public to have a meaningful voice *before* major decisions are made.

To share your views with the Public Life Advocate:
letters@plfo.org.

To share your views with the Mayor and Owensboro City Commission:

Ron Payne
Mayor of Owensboro
P.O. Box 10003
City Hall
Owensboro, KY 42302

City Commission
Candance Brake
Charlie Castlen
David Johnson
John Kazlauskas
P.O. Box 10003
Owensboro, KY 42302

To share your views with members of the hospital board:

Owensboro Medical Health System
811 East Parrish Avenue
Owensboro, KY 42303
270/688-2000
Jeff Barber, President/CEO
jbarber@omhs.org
Billy Joe Miles, Board Chairman

Citizens talk about Community Spirit & Unity

How can we bring about a stronger sense of community and public discussions that are civil and respectful?

Report on Aug. 6 public forum

Opening remarks: Importance of this event

Community spirit and community unity are at the heart of what creates a sense of community, a sense of belonging, a sense of feeling welcomed, needed, appreciated and part of something meaningful.

The spirit and unity of our community is a reflection of how we pull together, support one another and reach out – not just in times of tornadoes and ice storms, not just when the KKK announces that it's coming to town, but in our day-to-day activities. It sets a tone through which we either celebrate or denigrate our community, whether we take part or take a seat.

When we come together as a community, we can overcome divisions between rich and poor, black and white, urban and rural, liberal and conservative. We are more empathetic and compassionate. We involve more people. We dream bigger. We accomplish amazing things.

When good will permeates in our community, we feel better about ourselves. But this is not just about self-image. The spirit and unity of a community leaves an impression with tourists, entrepreneurs, businesses and professionals thinking about relocation or expansion, college graduates and retirees who are deciding where they want to live. A community that is spirited and unified attracts and holds on to good people.

Unfortunately, a different tone sometimes characterizes our community.

Many people feel alienated from this sense of community. They struggle to make ends meet and think nobody cares. They have grown apathetic, indifferent and cynical.

Some believe that a few influential people make all the decisions. They believe that private interests take precedent over the public interest. They don't believe that they have any power or influence and that their voice doesn't really matter when it comes to major decisions.

Others support thick-skinned leaders who are willing to make tough, unpopular decisions. They defend civic leaders, most of whom are volunteers who have nothing to gain from donating their services.

Some Owensboro-Daviess County citizens responded angrily to the recent insurance tax increase to finance the downtown master plan. This was followed by an unpopular OMU proposal to substantially increase utility rates.

From an expensive new hospital to modest fees for curbside recycling, from the "merger stinks" campaign of 20 years ago to the recent Highway 54 TIF plan – proposals can often be controversial, filled with misinformation and rancor.

Whether the issue is taxation, community decision making, fairness and equality, or the role of government, our community – like most others – is hindered by tension and division in our community, when there is distrust between officials and citizens, and hostile rhetoric instead of civil discourse.

Should we be concerned about factions in our community? Should we be concerned that many people don't feel like they have a meaningful role in our community?

Does Owensboro-Daviess County need to pull together? If so, this exercise may help us discover how we can heal the wounds, foster good will and mutual respect, and find common ground for progress.

Rodney Berry, Moderator

President, Public Life Foundation of Owensboro

Participants

The forum was open to all and was promoted through email invitations, networking with community groups and news releases. More than 60 people registered; 42 participated. Forty-five percent were women; 55 percent were men. Four (9.5 percent) African Americans participated.

Participants reflected a healthy cross section of the community and included:

- a retired electrician
- two college professors
- several neighborhood association leaders
- one working and three retired Texas Gas employees
- a minister
- a security guard
- a homebuilder
- a leader of a civic/service club
- a county commissioner
- a member of the symphony orchestra
- a school social worker
- a retired engineer
- a philanthropist
- a retired social service executive
- a retired public health worker
- a medical librarian
- a retired public information specialist
- a museum administrator
- a member of the parole board
- a small business owner
- a Hospice director
- a retired city planner
- a college development director



Format

Participants were divided into discussion groups of six-to-eight. Ground rules were reviewed to stress the importance of participation, listening, mutual respect and deliberation over debate. Each group was led by an experienced facilitator. A recorder captured key points, themes and the frequency of the comments.

Following each discussion period, several group reports were shared with the full group. This report is a tabulation and analysis of all the recorder's notes from all the groups.

Report on Discussions

#1 Let's assume that most people in Owensboro-Daviess County care about this community and generally like living here. What are the qualities about our community that we should acknowledge and celebrate as true assets for us to enjoy and from which we can all benefit? Are there areas that could use improvement for community quality of life?

Abundant amenities. The most common response to this question reflected a strong value in the amenities available in our community: recreation facilities and programs, parks, the Greenbelt, Friday after Five, festivals and the arts. Participants see Owensboro-Daviess County as a great place to raise a family. Outstanding schools and colleges. The right size for many, easy to get around in. A safe and affordable community.

A caring and generous community. The caring nature of our people also ranked well. The friendly people. Concerned and dedicated

volunteers and organizations. Generous citizens, corporations and philanthropists.

Natural resources and fine institutions. Other attributes were mentioned: the Ohio River, quality health care and wellness programs, diverse industry, agricultural production. Leaders with vision. Basic services (e.g., police, fire) and freedoms (e.g., religion) that are so often taken for granted.

#2 Do you believe that there are tensions among certain segments of our population? If so, what are the factors contributing to those tensions? Lifestyles? Economic factors? Personal or political beliefs? Is it resistance to change? How important decisions are made?

Narrow-mindedness, special interests and favoritism. Participants said tensions divided our community. They attributed those tensions to personal and political beliefs, special interests, and people with tunnel vision. They see the same people serving on boards, commissions and committees where most decisions are made.

Low-income pressures. They also believe that economic factors result in tensions. Struggling families and single parents live under immense pressure. They see a growing gap between the rich and poor.

Urban-rural tensions continue. Participants acknowledged that urban-rural tensions linger from the 1990 referendum on a proposal to merge city and county governments. Consequently, many citizens are still wary of government leaders.

A few make the major decisions and set community priorities. Although not cited as often, some participants were still skeptical of how important decisions are made and how priorities are established. They appreciate leaders who are decisive and make things happen, but they also want all citizens to feel empowered so that their voice is valued.

Fear of change sets us back. Some participants said that the fear of change contributes to tension in our community and that some individuals and groups are effective at manipulating the truth to spread fear.

Poor communication results in tension. Participants pointed to the need for skilled communicators and visionary leaders to overcome misinformation, apathy and cynicism. Many people – particularly young people – do not read newspapers. A technology gap appears to separate youth and the adult population.

#3 What is the level of trust between ordinary citizens and our leaders (elected, appointed)? Do citizens at-large and leaders try to appreciate and understand the circumstances and responsibilities of each other?

Lack of trust is unsettling, but citizens as well as leaders are to blame. Participants talked about widespread distrust. However, they were as critical of the public as they were of officials. They cited poor participation, endless complaining and misinformation, troublemakers who complain but never offer alternatives. Many voters focus on a single issue or don't get involved unless an issue affects them. Participants said that we need better venues for communication and public dialogue, and that technology could be used more effectively.

Taxation, indifference to hardship hinders trust. Nonetheless, some said that the lack of trust is rooted in excessive taxation and government officials who don't really listen and don't understand their plight.

Some officials deserve our support. Others said that officials should be independent but not obstinate. However, once they are elected, the public should give them a chance and support them. There should be more empathy for visionary leaders and officials who reach out.

Need better mechanism for communication. Some participants stressed the need for two-way communication: citizens need to be informed; officials need to disclose and be transparent. They recommended that communication could be improved if a public information manager was added to facilitate communication between the public and governments, boards of public commissions, tax districts and public agencies. Participants said that the We the People Town Meeting enhanced communication but it did not build trust between the public and community leadership.

Suspicious of power. In some discussions, there was a general uneasiness about big and powerful institutions: our hospital, school systems, big business, labor, and those who will profit from the public investment downtown.

#4 In terms of unity and teamwork, what qualities would characterize an ideal Owensboro-Daviess County?

A united voice. The most frequent call was for a united voice for Owensboro-Daviess County. This could include a united government; if not, participants called for a common vision, compromise and cooperation, consensus, common ground for action. City and county taxpayers need to be empathetic and appreciate one another's circumstances.

No reluctance to share information – openly and honestly. Participants said that a united community would be a well-informed community with leaders who were open and honest, who set forth information, circumstances and options – warts and all. We would educate our citizenry, but we would see more citizens taking the initiative to be well-informed on their own.

Civil dialogue over hostile rhetoric. To some participants, an ideal community would be one in which civil deliberation was integrated into the routine of decision making. Officials and participating citizens would be open-minded and would withhold judgment until they understand various points of view. In such a community, we would resolve differences through dialogue and deliberation rather than by shouting one another.

All welcomed, all involved. In a united community, we would have active and effective neighborhood groups, more community involvement and more advocacy. We would pull together in crisis, share resources and collaborate. We would promote growth responsibly, build community pride, demonstrate racial equality, welcome the participation of seniors, be committed to full employment and well-paying jobs, and attract our educated youth after they graduate from college.

#5 What has to change in this place we call home in order for us to build a greater sense of community and united effort?

More positive participation. If we hope to have greater unity and a stronger sense of community, we need more participation. Volunteerism must be promoted, supported and celebrated. We need an attitude adjustment, a pep rally. We need to celebrate our successes and set a positive tone. Our public and charitable institutions can facilitate this.

Open communication builds trust. We need better communication that is both community-wide and targeted to the neighborhood level. It needs to be two-way, involving citizens and officials. And to build confidence, transparency must characterize how we go about our business in this community.

Program ideas. Participants offered some practical suggestions: a public information officer, the need for better mechanisms to deliberate, and neighborhood “walk and talk” programs.

Institutionalize town meetings. Town meetings need to be ongoing and recurring. Agendas should be published and circulated around town.

Focus on the common good. Participants said that we need a heightened sense of empowerment, a stronger sense of ownership and connectedness. We must stay focused on the public good and consensus building. We must be willing to accept change and step out of our comfort zone.

Tolerance, crisis preparedness and leadership. What else has to change? Participants said we need more tolerance whether our divisions are grounded in urban- rural splits, religious beliefs, or educational differences. We need to be even better prepared to deal with a major crisis. Participants stressed the importance of charismatic leaders and leadership training to cultivate future leaders.

Other ideas. Practical challenges – improved transportation linkages, a more diverse and healthier community (in a broad sense), exchanges that expose us to new ideas from other communities – were also mentioned.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This forum was organized in response to the hostile rhetoric and hard feelings that came forth when city and county governments proposed and adopted an increase in the insurance tax to finance the downtown master plan. This was followed by a controversial proposal from Owensboro Municipal Utilities to substantially increase its rates.

The steering committee was not sure that a discussion about how we might build community spirit and unity could be substantive. This report verifies that the forum was worthwhile and successful. The event attracted diverse participation and produced many solid ideas that can be implemented by officials, governments, public commissions, tax districts and community organizations.

Weaving through the report are dozens of general themes that can enhance spirit and unity when put into practice. Moreover, there were a surprising number of tangible ideas, such as:

- Create a public information office (perhaps a joint city-county initiative)
- Institutionalize town meetings, making them part of the decision making routine in our community
- Intensify community education campaigns

- Establish better mechanisms for deliberation
- Establish neighborhood walk and talk programs
- Organize community celebrations, pep rallies
- Conduct a community pride campaign

The committee extends a hearty thank you to forum participants, facilitators, sponsors and all those who embrace the vision of a spirited and unified community. Let’s make it happen!

Sponsors

“We the People” Initiative
Citizens for Good Government
Public Life Foundation of Owensboro
Hager Educational Foundation
Owensboro Human Relations Commission
Owensboro Neighborhood Alliances

Steering Committee

Belinda Abell
Chair
Citizens for Good Government

Ed Allen
Chair
“We the People” Initiative

Rodney Berry
President
Public Life Foundation

Shelly Nichols
Executive Director
“We the People” Initiative

Keith Sanders
Executive Director
Hager Educational Foundation

Kathy Strobel
Office Manager
Public Life Foundation of Owensboro

Henry Zimmer
Former Social Services Professional

Riverport committee can stress that it will be guided by principles

The Mayor's Advisory Committee on the Privatization of the Riverport should publicly adopt a statement to underscore the values that will guide their deliberations and recommendations.

While the Mayor's Advisory Committee on the Privatization of the Riverport would be well-served to include several ordinary citizens to complement the influential business leaders who have been named to the committee, the process and comments of the committee to date have been encouraging.

Meetings have been open. A public forum was held early in the process, although the limited questions or comments suggest that citizens have much to learn about the matter at hand before they can come to an informed judgment.

Committee members appear to be withholding judgment until they have all the facts and understand all the options and ramifications. They have systematically attempted to sketch out the fact-finding that is needed. They have started the process of identifying the options and the advantages and disadvantages of those options.

The committee – and our community – would be well-served if the committee would take an additional step to underscore their commitment to the ethical values that will drive their decisions by adopting guiding principles similar to the following:

Proposed Guiding Principles for the Mayor's Advisory Committee on the Privatization of the Riverport

The committee will strive to make responsible recommendations that ...

- serve the public interest over special interests

- balance long-term and short-term costs and benefits to the taxpayer
- consider broader policy implications, including the sale or merger of other public facilities
- facilitate private investment, commerce and the creation of well-paying, sustainable jobs
- maximize our unique potential using river, rail, road and air transportation infrastructure
- consider local and regional impact
- complement and serve private enterprise rather than inappropriately compete with it
- reduce any adverse environmental consequences
- take into consideration the impact on stakeholder groups potentially effected by the recommendations
- take into consideration the views of well-informed citizens from all walks of life and all areas of our community

By adopting principles such as these, the committee would establish an ethical framework for its work and help members stave off private interests that may apply pressure down the road.

Given its strong beginning, the committee has an opportunity to demonstrate how a major community decision can be made in an open and transparent manner and, in so doing, enhance trust between the public and their public institutions.





WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE HAPPEN ON THE EXECUTIVE INN PROPERTY?

Workshop offers citizens an opportunity to shape a redevelopment vision

On Saturday, October 10 (8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.) at the Sportscenter, a community workshop is planned so that local officials can have a clear sense of what the public would like to see happen on the 17 acres along the riverfront adjacent to downtown Owensboro – the previous site of the Executive Inn.

The event is coordinated by the We the People initiative, citizens involved in promoting the recommendations that came forth from the 650 participants in the We the People Town Meeting in November 2007.

Workshop goals:

- to give officials a better sense of what the people want to see happen on this critical 17.5 acres along the riverfront
- to hear the ideas and views of people from all walks of life and all areas of Owensboro-Daviess County
- to come to an informed judgment on the choices available to us, and to understand the complexities, tradeoffs, costs and consequences of various choices
- to engage the community in this dialogue in the early stages of the project before decisions are made

- to dream big and make the most of this unprecedented opportunity
- to learn from the experiences of other cities, while helping to bring about a redevelopment unique to our community
- to participate in a fun, uplifting experience that brings us together as a community

Participants will:

- be introduced by consultants to various redevelopment themes and project concepts that could characterize the area
- see various ways in which those projects can be configured on the site
- be encouraged to offer their own ideas
- vote on their preferences

All are welcomed, but seating is limited. To help We the People plan the event, pre-registration is encouraged:

Register online at www.wethepeopletownmeeting.org or contact Shelly Nichols at 685-2652



Should we draw the line on coal-fired power plants?

According to tri-state environmental watchdog group, Valley Watch, a child in Evansville is five times more likely to be hospitalized with asthma than a child in Fort Wayne. Living in Evansville also correlates with higher rates of lung disorders, heart attacks, strokes and more.

The difference: Fort Wayne has no coal-fired power plants nearby.

Data for Owensboro-Daviess County would have to be comparable to Evansville. There are 17 coal-fired plants in our area, and three additional plants are planned, including the Cash Creek plant on the Daviess-Henderson County line along the Green River near Curdsville and Mount St. Joseph.

Many of the existing and planned plants in our area provide power for customers far from this region. For example, the Rockport, Indiana plant provides power

for northern Indiana and southern Michigan – 300 and more miles away.

New plants are subject to tougher emissions regulations and technology has improved. But as new plants are built, older, dirtier plants of comparable size are not eliminated, resulting in added air pollution..

Providing low-cost power can be helpful in attracting industry, creating jobs and reducing our reliance on foreign oil. But what should the conditions be for the approval of more coal-powered plants here? Should we require, for example, that they use Kentuckiana coal? Are there limits to where the power could be wheeled? What air-quality and health issues should be raised? And, at what point if any, should we draw the line on coal-fired power plants?

Send your comments to letters@plfo.org



Incentive policy

Public funds for broad economic development efforts and downtown plan warrant thorough public airing.

Owensboro-Daviess County should strive unapologetically for the highest standards of openness and transparency. More accountability inherently leads to better decisions and builds trust between citizens and public institutions.

The experience with the downtown master plan is a good example: the planning process (that was characterized by public participation) was generally well-received; the financing of the plan (that was determined before the perfunctory public hearings) was a public relations disaster.

Granted, developers and investors do not wish to “show their hand” to the competition, but when incentives involve significant amounts of tax dollars, the public has every right to be informed about the options under consideration: the scale of the proposal, the design, the financing, the incentives requested.

If a “public review” occurs after the decisions have essentially been made, why bother? If the public perceives that decisions are made behind closed doors, it will certainly bring forth more public cynicism and hostile rhetoric.

Moreover, an open process exposes special interests. Without an open process, public bodies and private nonprofit organizations can claim they are accountable, but where is the check? What keeps private interests and conflicts of interest from occurring?

Thomas Jefferson said:

“I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society than the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.”

Jefferson stood for keeping power in the hands of the people, but the people must be provided with information. They can only be enlightened when they are not left in the dark.

McAuley Clinic expanding capacity

In light of the closing of the Free Clinic, the recent announcement that the McAuley Clinic will be expanding hours of operation is a welcomed development. The clinic, located next to the Daniel Pitino Shelter, serves the poor and uninsured with primary care and prescription medications. Many of the patients who rely on the clinic will be well-served by evening and weekend hours.

Reports of the clinic's impact are impressive and encouraging, even though a clinic physician was replaced by a nurse practitioner. Owensboro Medical Health System (OMHS), Catholic Health Partners and other donors are to be commended for underwriting this outreach program.

Despite the services of the McAuley Clinic, the Reach Clinic and Daviess County Community Access Project (DC-CAP), the patient volume at the OMHS emergency room continues to climb. This is a reflection of the growing number of uninsured and underinsured, and the shortage of primary care in our region.

The Free Clinic served the working poor and was staffed to a great extent by retired physicians and nurses. Let's hope that our health care community can find a role for these generous retired health care professionals who want to continue to make a contribution.





Miller House restoration raises the bar

A hearty congratulations and salute to the Larry Kirk family on the opening of The Miller House restaurant, a beautiful addition to our downtown dining scene and a first-rate example of how the older buildings can be preserved and adapted for new uses.

For public safety, beauty, and the protection of nearby property owners, a reasonable limit should be placed on how long properties can be neglected and abandoned. Taxpayers are financing a \$40 million riverfront and an \$80 million downtown

master plan. These projects should be complemented by healthy neighborhoods of all income levels to attract vitality and buying power back to downtown.

The following structures, within a few blocks of our downtown core, have been vacant, in some instances, for many years. Should we revisit the building codes and regulatory capacity to establish more stringent guidelines for property owners who allow structures to deteriorate?

