

Core Business District Revitalization Underway

Meridian Township is well aware of the need for business revitalization in 3 of our core business districts; Carriage Hills Shopping Center, Downtown Okemos and Haslett Village Square. Township Officials and staff have sought feedback from residents, developers and business owners to focus major business revitalization efforts and made neighborhood/commercial space revitalization a top priority.

While the Township has experienced over \$72,000,000 in new investment from January 2017 – October 2017; and has welcomed almost 40 new businesses this year, the blight and empty storefronts in these core business districts has not gone unnoticed by the township.

Three major efforts are happening simultaneously to propel these districts in a positive direction; adoption of an updated Master Plan that creates less roadblocks, utilize form based code which provides a guide that supports economic development and multi modes of travel, and selection of our first Economic Development Director.

The first district being focused on is Downtown Okemos. With the Tuba Museum being taken over by the bank for lack of tax payments, Douglas J purchasing the property on the northwest corner and Okemos Ace Hardware's recent announcement they are closing their doors, we thought it imperative to tag along with Economic Development Director Chris Buck on one of his business district informational meetings with concerned residents and neighborhood groups to find out what everyone wants to know so we can bring you answers to the most frequently asked questions.

Has any property in Downtown Okemos exchanged hands? No changes in legal ownership of properties in the Downtown Okemos grid have occurred but we have heard there are a lot of conversations being had, which is exciting. Fewer people owning more property means we may get larger developments and that there's a better chance for continuity vs. several people each renovating or building a new building.

When is the earliest we can expect to hear what is going to happen on these 2 blocks? There is a chance we will hear something as early as the spring. Since the public knows our Master Plan is close to being ratified – which will publicly declare that we have a vision for redevelopment and will have new rules to encourage that – developers are likely waiting in the wings to present their ideas.

What has spurred development interest in the area? The improvements in the economy has made it feasible to borrow the appropriate funds to get a development built that will result in profits for the builder. It has also made it possible for companies to spend money on new locations – Whole Foods, Chick-fil-a and Costco all moving in recently is a testament to this. Beyond that, the community has been voicing its concern and the Township is listening. The Master Plan is declaring a different type of development will be welcomed and attractive to builders.

Why has nothing moved into the old 'MARC' building? We don't know for certain but are hopeful that the MARC building wasn't immediately developed after it was purchased because the builder is hoping to acquire a larger parcel. Our desire is to look up and see that something transformational was built but it took a little longer, vs. we have a new, small building surrounding by an aging infrastructure.

What steps has the Township taken to encourage development/eliminate blight? The Master Plan speaks directly to redevelopment. A redevelopment fund has been established where either grants or low/no interest loans can help a project occur. The zoning ordinances are diligently being modernized to minimize red tape while preserving high quality. An Economic Development Director was hired to meet with the developers, land owners, realtors and business owner to bring projects to the table.

What would concept drawings look like for the area? Downtown Okemos is a mix of residences, office space and commercial retailers. The “after” scenario continues with that theme but with a more modern flair including multi-story buildings with commercial or offices on the ground floor with high quality living space on the second or even third floors. We’ve repeatedly heard that young professionals and baby boomers are looking for quaint, low maintenance living space with restaurants and services within walking distance. Downtown Okemos is a short walk to both Meijer and all of the enterprises along Grand River Avenue.

What are the plans for transportation? There have been a lot of discussions to make the region more multi-modal where communities are connected not only by cars, but by bus, bike or feet. Improved sidewalks, crosswalks, bus stops, wider sidewalks, bike lanes, connected pathways and less intrusive parking lots will make the region safer and better looking.

What do people in the DDA area wish to see? People in the DDA area would like to see a more vibrant and quaint shopping village. They have concerns that development will change the character of the neighborhoods nearby. Everyone will have a voice and I believe we can end up with something pleasing to all.

What do people outside the DDA area wish to see? They want to not only have something that isn’t ugly to drive by, but becomes a destination for the whole family. People have said they’d like to see this area become a space where they can come with the family by bike – dad gets a paper and a coffee, the kids get ice cream, mom gets her haircut and they all meet at the park for the afternoon.

How do you blend preserving some of the historic parts of DDA with eliminating blight? By simply communicating with the developers. There are a few buildings in that area that have character and can be preserved vs. demolished and rebuilt.

What are some of the changes we might see right now in this district? Okemos Ace Hardware closing, while sad and the end of a fantastic 42 year run of a great local retailer, could be the signs of that block getting completely redesigned. As of the date of this interview, we don’t have any confirmation.

What happens to leases of Ace Hardware? There are 3 tenants; Special A’Fare Catering, Mitten Raised and Arty’s Party Studio. They have been told to vacate by December 31, 2017. The Township is helping with location efforts in any way we can.

How does the Township plan to address any potential parking issues? By working with the developers and engaging the Ingham County Road Department to ensure that traffic volumes will be managed.

Is there Shaping the Avenue/CATA money available to help reshape Downtown Okemos? We are utilizing consultants, who are free to the Township, to help us write and adopt the proper zoning to make it more clear what kind of high quality construction we want.

What happens to the current property owners if they sell under the future adopted Master Plan? If the property owners sell, then whomever they sell to will have the opportunity to utilize the land that is bought in its current condition, or rebuild to the standards the township is currently writing.

How do historical standards apply to any (if at all) buildings with the new Master Plan? It is my understanding that any building with official historical designation will be protected under that governing body. If it's just a "cool old building" that has useful life, I hope to convince the developer to keep it and refurbish it.

If current home owners want to sell surrounding the two blocks with property for sale, or in the DDA area, what process will they need to go through and how will affect neighboring homes/protect neighboring homes? If a home owner sells their home, the new tenant will likely have the right to occupy the home as it stands. The rules aren't completely clear yet, but we've been hearing that they could make exterior improvements without a problem, but if they wanted to demo the home and rebuild – or do an addition that is significant – they will likely be required to rebuild under the new guidelines, which are being drafted.

How big is the DDA area? That information is available on the Township website but basically the DDA catchment extends from Wonch Park north to Grand River Ave and east and west of Okemos Road by about 3 – 4 blocks.

How big is the DDA area up for revitalization now? Probably a much smaller footprint. The 4 blocks west of Okemos road above and below Hamilton seem ripe for development since so many buildings are listed for sale.

What are the mixed use core districts the township is focusing on? In addition to the Okemos 4 – corners, the Township welcomes ideas on how to help vibrancy happen in the Haslett 4 – corners of Marsh and Haslett roads, as well as in the Carriage Hills shopping center at Lake Lansing and Hagadorn Roads.

What is the timeline we can see something happening? It's hard to say but meetings are beginning to happen to ask that exact question. Stay tuned!