

CHAPTER 16

LOOKING FORWARD

The first half of the 20th Century was Evanston's "golden years," a period of growth in size, function, quality and reputation. The second half of the 20th Century was substantially different. The icing on the cake went to other, newer suburbs. Evanston became challenged by and vulnerable to a new set of trends. Once again Evanston proved itself by virtue of its resourcefulness and resilience. Hence, downtown has enjoyed a renaissance in the 1990s. What then of the future, the 21st Century?

In the immediate future downtown revitalization will contribute positively to the community's fiscal dilemma. Its two tax increment financing districts will expire in the near future, distributing substantial property taxes to the city's general fund, the school districts, and other taxing bodies. The Downtown II TIF district expires in 2008. It was created in 1985 with a base equalized assessed value (EAV) of \$1.8 million. The 2001 EAV was \$29.6 million and its current EAV is \$133.7 million and still increasing. Annual tax revenue to the TIF fund is exceeding city forecasts.

The Washington National TIF district, created in 1994, will expire in 2017. It's original EAV of \$25.8 million increased to \$31.5 million in 2001 and is currently \$48.0 million. It, too, is generating annual tax revenues exceeding city forecasts. The tax windfall of these two TIF districts to all taxing bodies will be significant evidence of the City Council's wisdom in the 1985-1995 decade, and will be a driving force for overall community enhancement in the 21st Century.

A longer range outlook for Evanston and its downtown is also bright, based on the community's reflection of economic and social trends evidenced in the broader culture of America. In 1980, futurist Alvin Toffler (author of Future Shock, 1970) published a sequel, The Third Wave. The "third wave" is that which follows the agricultural society and the industrial society. Among the characteristics he assigns to a third wave city are:

- The death of industrialism
- Wholistic approaches

- High-tech, high-touch, interactive communications
- Information/knowledge essential to success
- The university will replace the factory as the central institution of tomorrow
- Downsizing; small business; home-based business; networking
- Increased diversity; decentralization; niches
- Heightened moral pressure on corporations
- The need for meaning in work
- New concentration on "community;" 24 hour residents
- Not majorities, but minorities that count
- New definition of "minorities" based on common interests
- The only constant is change

Evanston is a "third wave" city.

In 1999, two Harvard professors published another insightful book, The Experience Economy, in which they state that "Work is Theater and Every Business a Stage." Their premise is that Americans no longer purchase simply a product or service, but an "experience." **Downtown Evanston is now a "stage" where experiences happen daily.**

This story of downtown revitalization began with reference to the opening of Old Orchard and other shopping centers that sapped the life out of downtown. Now, 50 years later, that trend has run its course to a significant degree. In February, 2000 the Urban Land magazine, published by the Urban Land Institute (the nation's largest and most reputable organization of major real estate developers) published an editorial that said, "A major force behind shopping mall openings and closings is the change in America's social and consumer trends. The stand alone fortress mall with unfriendly pedestrian connections to adjoining development is dying. Main streets and town centers are proving to be the types of developments that best accommodate these trends by providing a sense of community and place in which to enjoy shopping." **Evanston no longer wants its downtown to be like a shopping center; shopping centers want to be like downtown Evanston.**

In 2002 yet another book, The Rise of the Creative Class by Richard Florida, shed new light on the way we work and live. It documents a fundamental theme: “The growing role of creativity in our economy.” “Leading the shift are the nearly 38 million Americans in many diverse fields who create for a living -- the Creative Class.” **Evanston attracts more of these persons every year.**

Florida goes on to say that “Economic growth is driven by the location choices of creative people -- the holders of creative capital -- who prefer places that are diverse, tolerant and open to new ideas.” Furthermore, a place “where they can help craft the future.” Of primary significance is his finding that “Downtown revitalization is associated with the same lifestyle factors that appeal to the Creative Class.” **These factors exist in Downtown Evanston.**

These are but a few of the national trends that strongly suggest that downtown Evanston’s future is bright. But there are more. For example, the real estate development projects of recent years have been constructed by some of the largest, most capable developers of their type in the Midwest and the country. They have made “The Smart Move.” Their expertise adds much to Evanston’s resourcefulness. Furthermore, the many residential units that are being constructed downtown not only generate people on the sidewalk seven days a week and a captured market for many businesses, but they generate stakeholders who will support the quest for a viable and attractive downtown, one that is people-friendly.

What else might the future bring?

1. More predominantly residential, mixed-use, multi-story developments to satisfy an unsated market demand and the city’s need for a larger tax base.
2. A continued, although modest, increase in dining, entertainment, home furnishings, and convenience shopping, and lifestyle/healthcare businesses.
3. More redevelopment west of the Union Pacific (Metra) tracks, resulting in a more cohesive downtown and a shifting center of pedestrian activity westward.

4. It is not implausible, as it may have seemed a decade ago, that a major retailer, a corporate headquarters, or another hotel will locate downtown.
5. Evanston may become one of the first suburban communities in the nation to witness the elimination of all off-street surface parking lots, replaced by parking structures.
6. Greater emphasis will be placed on the design review of future projects, public and private, to avoid some of the inadvertent design and aesthetic flaws in recent projects.
7. Northwestern University and associated activities will continue to expand near, adjacent to and even within the downtown to their long-term mutual benefit.
8. Arts and cultural activities will be expanded, including more art in public places.
9. Downtown will not only be a business district and visitor destination, but a highly desirable residential neighborhood.
10. CTA viaducts at Davis Street and Grove Street will be replaced. Two unused Union Pacific viaducts (at Church and Davis Streets) will be removed and the viaduct at Golf Road will be repainted.
11. Fountain Square will be substantially redesigned and rebuilt, even enlarged, to reestablish its prominence in the fabric of downtown as a memorial to war veterans, a functional venue for public events, and a place of civic beauty.

New civic leadership will be emerging. Most of those who have guided the city and downtown revitalization for the past several decades with vision and continuity will be retiring in the near future, not because of conflict or lack of enthusiasm, but simply age. Who will be the new leaders? How will they keep the flame burning? These are the questions many communities are confronted with. But Evanston is unique. Potential leaders are everywhere. Many are already assuming responsibilities; others are being groomed. They will step forward just as did their predecessors.

Clearly, the future of downtown Evanston is the brightest it has been since Old Orchard Shopping Center opened in 1956. Although the founders of Evanston could never have envisioned downtown Evanston in the 21st Century, they would have every reason to be proud of what it has and will become.