

VIRGINIA

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Downtown makeover proposals draw raves

By Todd Jackson
and Matt Chittum
The Roanoke Times

The usually vacant, aged top floor of Roanoke's iconic City Market Building was transformed this week into a laboratory for a radical makeover of downtown.

Almost before the public's eyes, a team of consultants working in a makeshift office of folding chairs and tables scratched out plans for:

- Putting outside balconies on buildings, to create a New Orleans feel.
- Moving the farmers market stalls to a structure that would run down the center of Market Street like a spine.
- Building a food distribution and staging area on the Church Avenue side of the market area where local cooks could show off their favorite recipes using locally grown produce.
- Turning the market building

See DOWNTOWN, 3

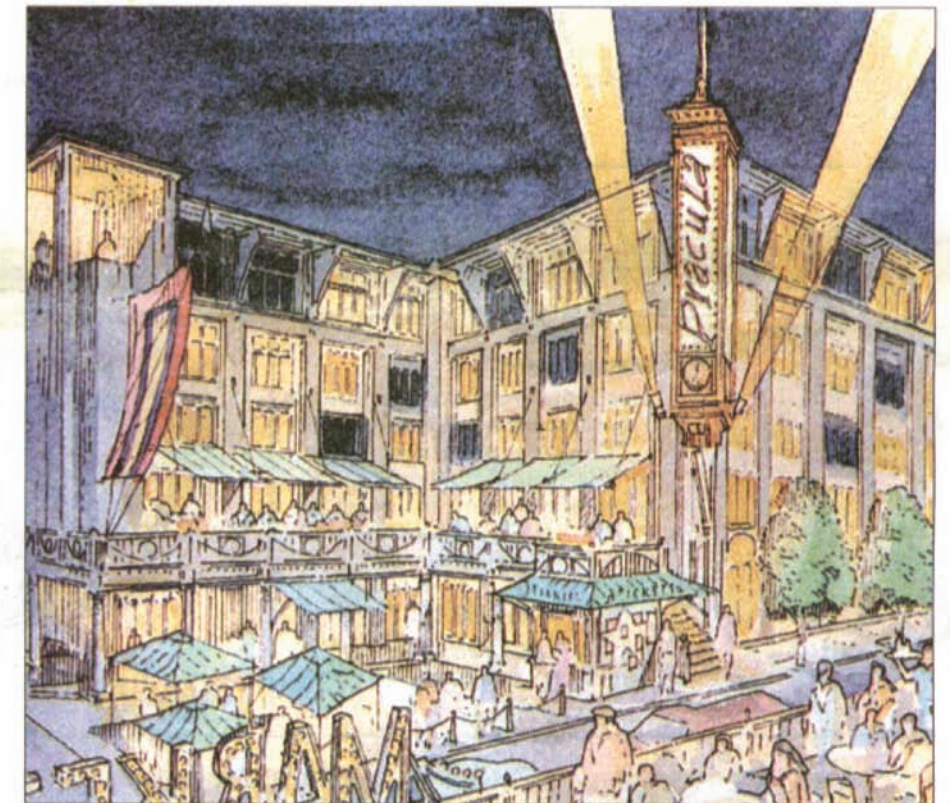
[@roanoke.com](http://roanoke.com)

See each of the renderings and share your ideas on the roanoke.com message boards.



Renderings courtesy of Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co.

View: North on Market Street from the intersection at Church Avenue. A central design change involves moving the farmers market stalls from the sidewalk on the left to the center of Market Street. This would bring light and attention to the storefronts on the left and facilitate pedestrian traffic. Though parking on Market Street would be eliminated, one-way traffic could still pass through. A consultant, however, suggests that on weekends or evenings or for special events, Market Street could be closed off from vehicles to create an outdoor mall atmosphere.



View: Market square looking south from the second floor of the Market Building. Part of the guiding philosophy of the proposals is to expand the market upward, shown here in the form of a second-floor balcony on the Center in the Square building.

DOWNTOWN: Private sector must support ideas for them to work

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inside out, so the existing enclosed food court restaurants would face the outside, complete with new glass doors so dining activity could be seen from the street.

■ Constructing a huge Spanish staircase adjoining the pedestrian bridge that leads from the Hotel Roanoke to create a European style entrance into Roanoke's heart.

■ Adding a movie theater and residential development on downtown's Williamson Road edge.

An internationally known planning firm hired by the city, Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co., set up shop in the market building and held public meetings from Saturday through Friday. It put together an improvement model for downtown by using the existing downtown schematics and mixing in its expertise with community-generated ideas.

The firm, recognized for its pursuit of reawakening American urban centers, dispatched a team of experts to Roanoke, including designers who produced art-show quality, watercolor renderings of new downtown scenes.

Leading the firm's initiative is Tom Lowe, its Charlotte, N.C.-based director of town planning, who's a Roanoke native and a graduate of Patrick Henry High School. Lowe said his firm will prepare a master plan, hold another public meeting in the next



Tom Lowe, Roanoke native, heads consulting firm initiative.

What happens next:

■ Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co. will spend a few weeks refining its proposals and then return to Roanoke for a single workshop to get further public input.

■ In December, DP-Z will present a draft report and implementation plan, modeled on the one produced by the Design '79 process that sparked the 1980s market renaissance.

■ City leaders hope to be able to use the draft to begin putting aside money in next year's budget so work can begin as soon as possible.

Your thoughts:

■ See all six of the renderings showing the primary proposals produced by DP-Z at www.roanoke.com, where you can also post your comments.

■ Comments can be made directly to Roanoke officials by e-mailing planning@roanokeva.gov or calling (540) 853-1730.

few weeks, and then present a draft report to Roanoke City Council in December.

The renderings and initial ideas for a spruced-up downtown were drawing rave reviews late in the week.

"It's stunningly cool," said Ford Kemper, a lawyer and board member of Downtown Roanoke Inc., a tax-supported entity that oversees the city's historic center.

Others had similar initial reviews of the proposals. "They're right on," said

Downtown Roanoke Inc. Market Manager Hope Hollingsworth. "They're revolutionary, they're bright, they're fresh ... They could completely change the face of our downtown."

But some offered up a reality check.

Carolyn Lagen of Mount Airy, N.C., said she was in downtown this week to eat lunch with her daughter. Lagen said they had a difficult time finding a parking place on the street or in a garage. She said their vehicle was later ticketed in a metered space.

"It was a real hassle," she said. "That place is not tourist-friendly at all."

Parking is an issue that was mentioned frequently in the meetings this week. Lowe said. If improvements are made to the downtown to increase its drawing power, Lowe said he believes people will be willing to park in garages and on the fringes of downtown.

Another concern is whether Roanoke can actually implement the high-quality ideas that Duany Plater-Zyberk will recommend.

Lowe said there must be a buy-in from the private sector for some of the major ideas to have a chance.

Hollingsworth said there wasn't as much input this week from the public as she'd hoped, but the process was mind-blowing to watch.

Hollingsworth suggested a kitchen where market vendors could prepare pies, preserves and the like, and within minutes it was incorporated into the plans.

"It's really remarkable the kind of blitz they do turning people's ideas into images," said Roanoke Senior Planner

Chris Chittum.

By Friday afternoon, artists had drawn and painted a half-dozen elaborate renderings.

The city hopes to move with the same urgency, according to Chittum. One reason for requiring a draft report in December is to allow the city to begin setting aside

money in the next budget to begin work.

Hollingsworth believes if the proposals are brought to fruition, it could change not only outsiders' perceptions of Roanoke, but residents' views of the city as well.

"Roanokers have lost some faith in the study process,"

she said. "Hopefully, this will be an opportunity to redeem that faith."

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View: North on Jefferson Street. The consultants say they believe a trolley car system would draw interest to Jefferson Street, which currently lacks much to attract market visitors. Consultants say Jefferson Street would be a natural location to entice national retail outfits to the downtown area.

Renderings courtesy of Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co.