

## IN MY OPINION

# Dream a little about downtown

BY COLIN READ

I appreciate the recent series of editorials that instills a sense of community pride in our great Lake Champlain and our historic downtown core. This is only my third year in Plattsburgh, so I come to the community with eyes wide open. And I like what I see.

It is all too easy to take this beautiful place for granted. But if you think about it for a moment, what other town in this country has such a wonderful juxtaposition of a lake, majestic mountains, a river, fascinating history and strong institutions in one community — and so much within walking distance of an international airport? This town is truly a jewel.

The jewel has gone unpolished though. There are probably all kinds or reasons why we don't celebrate the downtown like Burlington has along Church Street. And I am sure there are many good reasons why we don't have a river walk like the much celebrated San Antonio Riverwalk. Likewise, there must be good reasons why our sewage treatment plant is on perhaps the most prized piece of parkland in the entire downtown.

But there are also some very reasons why we ought to rise to the occasion and let the downtown live up to its true potential. Let's start with the sewage treatment plant. I have heard hotel developer after developer say that the proposed site for a new downtown hotel is ideal — except nobody wants to stay in a room

next to a sewage treatment plant. And without an anchor hotel downtown, the core of this great city will be relegated to a place that is vehicle oriented and not pedestrian friendly.

Convention goers want a location that does not require a vehicle. Of course, we have plenty of hotels on Route 3, but if it is the mall experience our visitors want, they'd be better off staying near the Mall of America in Minnesota.

Perhaps we fear any transformation of our downtown core that would bring it more upmarket. At the same time though, we lament how hard it is to keep our kids here after they graduate from high school or college. We have to produce for our kids and their spouses a community that is vibrant and has the amenities young professionals want. We have some great restaurants, we are working to rehabilitate the Strand Theater and we could use some interesting shops and colorful storefronts to make our downtown core attractive to young professionals and families.

While we are at it, could we develop a great river walk that could connect the downtown core to the new airport and the university and hospital? I can imagine a nice path along the Saranac that starts at a new hotel and park in place of the sewage treatment plant, rambles past some interesting bridges and old buildings, around a historic cemetery and ends in a nature preserve just beyond the SUNY Plattsburgh campus. I envision parents

with strollers, joggers and young couples of all ages enjoying the quiet path and watching the occasional kayaker paddle by.

Of course, a new hotel, a small-footprint state-of-the-art sewage treatment plant and a river walk will cost money. A sewage treatment plant with membrane biological reactors or the ability to generate power from outgases is far more efficient than past designs and requires much less space. Their final products are so clean they can even be used to fertilize farmland and discharged directly into marshland or used for irrigation. Such a solution would be good for the downtown and good for the environment, with lower operating costs than a legacy plant. These costs would be far more than made up by increased economic activity and business in the downtown core. And we could finally develop the hotel and create downtown beach access — something this town richly deserves.

So, let's dream a little and imagine what we could really make of our downtown. I am convinced if we do the analysis, we will discover that certain prudent investments into the attractiveness and amenities offered downtown will more than pay for themselves in increased economic activity. Let's do the math. If we are not willing to explore these options and invest in our own future, who will?

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