

Clinton Discusses Downtown Makeover

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Urban designer Gianni Longo presents during a public presentation a vision to revitalize downtown Clinton

Clinton is getting a new bridge over the Clinch River, and local leaders want to use that as an opportunity to revitalize the city's downtown, including redevelopment of the long-vacant Magnet Mills site on the riverfront.

But it's not a quick or easy process, requiring the removal of physical, economic and political barriers.

The Anderson County Chamber of Commerce is spearheading the movement, hiring consultant Gianni Longo of New York City-based Gianni Longo & Associates to develop a "vision plan" for changes to downtown.

Longo started with focus groups and public meetings late last year and presented the results April 3 to about 40 people at a public meeting in Clinton's Junior Achievement East Tennessee Building.

"Clinton has this interesting situation. There has been very little investment in downtown in a very long time," he said.

The 'positive spiral'

Clinton is the seat of Anderson County, but at 10,000 people has only about one-third the population of Oak Ridge. As late as the 1970s, Clinton's population was only half of today's, but it grew dramatically in the 1980s and has risen more slowly but steadily since then, according to census data.

Longo, who was involved in Chattanooga's downtown riverfront and Knoxville's own Market Square, said judicious redevelopment moves can create a "positive spiral," with one project sparking interest and investment in nearby development. But he stressed that nothing would happen without community support and commitment from public officials and private business.

While the state is handling the new bridge, plans for downtown have several other components. One is improving downtown streets themselves, encouraging infill development and pedestrian circulation. Another is linking downtown directly to the riverfront, turning the latter into a public attraction. And a third, closely related, is redevelopment of the long-vacant Magnet Mills site.

“We’re just trying to make Clinton a bigger and better place, not only to live but to work and play, and to visit,” Rick Meredith, Chamber president said.

The bridge

The Tennessee Department of Transportation is replacing the Hon. William Everette Lewallen Memorial Bridge on U.S. Highway 25, commonly called the “green bridge” due to the paint on its superstructure.

While the current bridge is a steel truss design, the new one will be flat and open like Knoxville’s Henley Street bridge, Meredith said.

“I just talked to TDOT this week, and it looks like that project will start somewhere between August and October of this year,” he said.

It will be slightly wider than the old bridge, to handle longer turn lanes at the intersection with State Route 61, and to accommodate bicycle lanes and sidewalks on both sides, according to Mark Nagi, TDOT Region 1 community relations officer.

The new bridge will be adjacent and just north of the existing bridge, which will remain open during construction and will be torn down after the new one is built, he said.

The roads

The Clinch River is a great asset but is now nearly inaccessible from downtown due to barriers of State Route 61 and U.S. Highway 25, Longo said. That has to change to make redevelopment a success, he said.

Longo’s sketches propose making the riverfront directly and easily accessible to pedestrians from downtown streets such as Church, Kincaid and Broad. But that’s not easy for locals to do, since TDOT controls the speed and traffic signals at S.R. 61.

The city has talked to TDOT about slowing traffic on S.R. 61 through downtown, City Manager Roger Houck said. Traffic islands and landscaping are planned, but new traffic lights are unlikely, he said.

Meredith, however, said prospects for more traffic lights could change if redevelopment begins to change the area.

Longo proposes a waterfront esplanade, backed by multi-story housing and ground-floor restaurants and retail, along the Magnet Mills site river frontage. Nearby but also isolated from downtown is Lake Front Park. It’s very popular, but with the coming development of a sports complex in South Clinton, the park’s tennis courts and baseball field can be turned into a large community green, Longo said.

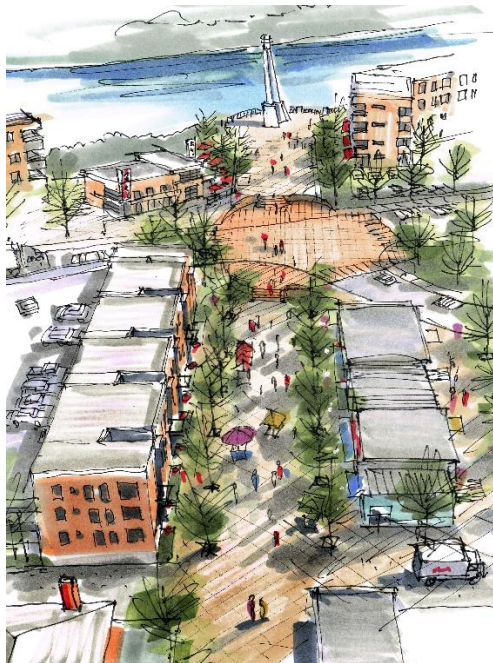
But all those plans depend on easy walking access from downtown.

The mill

Key to redevelopment is the 7-acre Magnet Mills site, which Longo described as both an eyesore and potential asset. It has 1,400 feet of frontage on the Clinch River and 1,200 feet of road frontage, according to Jerry Glenn, U.S. Realty commercial property broker.

The former hosiery mill at 105 N. Charles G. Seivers Blvd., once Clinton's largest employer, is owned by Clinch River Properties LLC. That's a partnership controlled by the Huang family of Knoxville, Glenn said.

Launched in 1905 by local investors, Magnet Mills employed 1,100 people by 1930. But the Southern textile industry declined, and the building was sold in the early 1960s. Two other businesses briefly occupied the complex, but by the mid-1980s the buildings were empty.



Longo said he doesn't think the remaining 53,000-square-foot building can be salvaged.

The owner has sought redevelopment of Magnet Mills for at least a decade and is eager to participate in current plans, Glenn said. It's listed for \$2.1 million altogether or can be divided into three parcels.

The plan

Clinton is ripe for revitalization as Knoxville's growth inches northward, Longo said. Small-city urban living is desired by young people and retirees, and Clinton is near enough to be a bedroom community for Knoxville, he said.

Photo Submitted – Gary Bumpus, Gianni Longo & Associates

"The main thrust for the Main Street area, which is the core of downtown, is slowing down traffic and creating conditions for infill development," Longo said.

Zoning requirements, such as for parking spaces and building setbacks, need to be eased to encourage development, he said. A major tree-planting campaign is also needed, and efforts to attract downtown restaurants, Longo said.

A firm vision of things to accomplish should emerge by January 2019, Meredith said.

The cost

How the various improvements would be paid for has not been determined, Meredith said. Longo mentioned both bonds and tax increment financing.

Clinton might fund a few items from its current budget, but that won't be determined until costs are known, Meredith said.

Public money is needed to "set the table" for private investment, Longo said. Fortunately, there is a ready-made body available to guide public investment, including issuing bonds: the Clinton Port Authority.

All affected property owners have shown some interest so far, Meredith said. The aim is not to dictate to property owners, but offer them a vehicle for improvements, he said.

The city and the chamber have applied for the Tennessee Downtowns program through the state Department of Economic and Community Development, Meredith said. That, and the associated Main Street program, offer some funding mechanisms for facade improvements and other relatively quick work.

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