

## PLAN ELEMENT XI: INITIATING COMMUNITY DESIGN AND IDENTIFICATION EFFORTS

### Rockford's Gateways



As communities became more and more competitive in the 1980s and '90s, people's perceptions of those communities assumed greater importance. A key component of this perception is what visitors or new arrivals see when they enter a community for the first time. Some steps have been taken locally to improve some of our gateways, primarily East State Street through the efforts of the Rockford Gateway Association; and West State Street through the recently prepared corridor plan. However, the fact remains that many of our gateways project a less than positive image of this community. Here are a few examples gleaned from comments made by the public during input sessions for this plan during 2002.

- ▶ The first shopping center you see when entering Rockford on North Main Street is North Towne. This does not convey a good image of the City. (During 2003, the mall portion of North Towne was removed and renovations will continue during 2004.)
- ▶ Kishwaukee and 11<sup>th</sup> Streets both convey the image of an old manufacturing town that is not doing well as evidenced by vacant and/or deteriorated factories, old homes in disrepair, marginal commercial businesses and used car lots.
- ▶ As we try to draw more and more people to Davis Park, we need to consider what they see on the way in along South Main Street and how it affects their overall view of Rockford.
- ▶ There's nothing to tell you that you've arrived in Rockford when you come in via West State Street.
- ▶ There were several comments, pro and con, about the welcome panels at I-90 and East State Street. The most specific concern was that they say Rockford is "stuck in the 1970s."

Gateway plans begun by the Rockford Gateway Association for East State Street several years ago need to be finalized and implemented, and new ones developed for each of the City's other major entryways — West State Street, North and South Main Streets, Kishwaukee Street, North 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, 11<sup>th</sup> Street, South Alpine Road and East Riverside Boulevard. While the 2020 Plan obviously includes these areas, it does not get down to the level of detail required for a true gateway plan. A brief description of the ongoing planning process for East State Street gives an idea of what can be involved in one of these plans.

The East State approach is further along than any of the others because of the creation in 1990 of a private, not-for-profit organization called the Rockford Gateway Association, or RGA. Membership consists primarily of businesses along East State, with input from various public agencies such as the Rockford Park District and the City of Rockford. According to its mission statement, RGA's goal is to "Influence purposeful development of an attractive entrance to the Rockford Community along the East State Street Corridor." Through active fundraising, including grant funding, the RGA has been able to create the landscaping on the north side of East State Street at the I-90 interchange, complete with the welcome panels. They have worked to create a strategic plan for the entire corridor from Fairview Boulevard east to the Boone County line, although most of their efforts have been in the Alpine Road to I-90 area. Their plans focus on three areas — signage, circulation and image. The process being used to create the corridor plan involves a combination of brainstorming sessions attended by a wide variety of people representing various interests, with smaller task forces focusing on each of the three topics being dealt with. The difficulty lies in arriving at plans that dare to dream but that are still not totally beyond the realm of



possible achievement. Because of this and the volunteer nature of the work being done, it can be a lengthy and time consuming process.

Similar approaches should be tried in other corridors as well. Some work has already been done along South Main Street in the area around Klehm Arboretum, and a major planning effort was recently completed for the West State Street corridor. At minimum, any gateway plans should address the following issues while allowing the distinct character of each corridor to come through.

- ▶ **Circulation:** What are the best ways to move both vehicular and pedestrian traffic through and within the gateway area? Other gateways should learn from what has and has not worked in the East State Street corridor, clearly the most heavily developed of all of them.

- ▶ **Landscaping:** Where appropriate (and where space is available), landscaping should be incorporated into gateway plans for the right-of-way. A good example of what can be done is the newly built section of Charles Street between 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Streets. Including a landscaped median made a huge difference in how the new street has been perceived, both by residents along it and by those who drive the street everyday. The major difficulties here are finding room in the right-of-way to include landscaping of sufficient quantity and quality to have an impact, finding an organization that will maintain the landscaping once it's installed, and getting the cooperation of IDOT on those roadways where they have jurisdiction.



- ▶ **Lighting and street furniture:** Successful gateway improvements are frequently in the details. These details can include such things as street lights, trash cans and benches. While their importance may vary from one gateway to another, well designed fixtures can make a difference in even the most generic of streets while at the same time serving a clearly functional purpose.

- ▶ **Signage:** It's important that people coming into the community for the first time be able to find their way to their particular destination with minimal difficulty. Signage is a key part of this. This includes not only signs directing people to different major destinations, such as the Sportscore or MetroCentre, but also informing them of where they are in as clear a fashion as possible. This requires street signs that can be found and read easily that identify both the street being traveled on and any cross streets. It also requires easily identifiable street numbers for businesses along these major routes. From a more aesthetic standpoint, distinctive banners could be used to mark each gateway, giving each its own unique identity.

- ▶ **Design and Image:** Investigate ways to improve the aesthetics of each corridor. The specifics will vary depending on the area being considered. In some cases, such as State Street, it may involve a combination of design guidelines incorporated into Rockford's Zoning Ordinance to avoid the creation of any more bland big box stores, to a regular program of clean ups to clear trash from drainage ditches. In other cases, where there are large numbers of older industrial buildings, it may be necessary to create incentives as well as disincentives to convince owners of older, possibly derelict buildings to maintain their properties. This would involve expanding the Neighborhood Standards program into nonresidential areas.



- ▶ **Land Use and Historic Preservation:** Several of Rockford's major gateways are enhanced by architecturally significant and/or historic structures, many of which are single-family homes. East State Street between Fairview Boulevard and 9<sup>th</sup> Street, and North 2<sup>nd</sup> Street both have distinctive homes with significant architectural character. Most of the homes along North 2<sup>nd</sup> Street are located within the Brown's Hills/ Knightsville Historic District. East State Street's homes, however, are not within a historic

district. Although mostly intact, heavy traffic, pressures for commercial development and institutional expansion have all had negative impacts on the residential section of this important gateway. In some cases, the City has allowed offices to be established in residential structures, preserving the structures and their residential appearance. The City must not take this attractive gateway for granted, especially considering that engineering for transportation improvements for this section of East State Street has been programmed by IDOT. The City must keep in mind that this two-mile section of East State is often a major portion of a visitor's first impression of Rockford while to many others it is their daily impression of Rockford.

Future gateway plans must be developed with public and private cooperation and with the commitment of businesses and residents along each corridor. However, it is equally important that the City take a leadership role in developing these plans for the simple reason that the impact of these gateways reaches much farther than their adjoining neighborhoods. They are a reflection of who we are as a whole community. The City, through its powers of providing quality infrastructure, zoning control, property maintenance, economic development, and public financing, must be a leader when it comes to ensuring that Rockford has the most inviting and attractive gateways in the State of Illinois. This City has long suffered from a negative image, both from internal and external forces. The major gateways to our City are like mirrors, reflecting an image of what we see as a community and what visitors see as their first impression. We need to ensure that that first impression is a good impression.

## **Community Design**

Once new arrivals or visitors have passed the gateway through which they entered Rockford, what do they see? Does Rockford *look* like the kind of place they would want to spend some time in, maybe even move to, or move their business to? Is there anything distinctive about it? Does it look like a community that holds high standards for new development?

Concerns about appearances are based on more than just a desire of a few to control how things look. They are also based on economics. A community's image is important to its economic well-being. The best places to live, work and visit are generally those that are willing to uphold their standards in the face of pressure to allow lowest common denominator development. Businesses evaluate locations based on their economic potential. If the potential is there, then they will usually accommodate local design, landscaping and/or signage requirements.

In 1986, the American Planning Association published a report by Attorney Christopher Duerkson entitled "Aesthetics and Land-Use Controls: Beyond Ecology and Economics." In it, he addressed the increasing acceptance by the courts of land-use regulations based on aesthetics, approving increasingly widespread efforts by local governments across the country to "protect what is special about their communities." Other communities have used these concerns to protect everything from historic properties to scenic views to trees. They have also used them to regulate signs and billboards as well as the growing array of outdoor communications towers and antennas.

Rockford does have a program in place to protect its historic resources, and has worked hard over the past 15-20 years to enhance the image of its downtown. However, its involvement in visual design issues elsewhere has been largely limited to landscaping requirements for nonresidential properties. In the years ahead, we need to broaden this scope, taking the necessary steps to ensure that Rockford is not only a highly affordable community but also a highly desirable one to live and do business in.

To delve more deeply into the problem, we need to assess what design-related issues exist that need to be addressed. These could include the following:



- ▶ **Generic design**, especially among big box retailers. A phenomenon of the 1990s, big boxes are just that — big boxes. They are generally one-story masonry buildings with no windows, no ornamentation beyond the franchise name, and an ocean of pavement in front for parking. At best, they are bland, anonymous buildings. At worst, they present a hostile front to the world with no apparent place for pedestrians and no relation to their neighbors. Communities with good design review mechanisms, land use plans and zoning policies are in a much stronger position to negotiate with national retail chains than those without them.



- ▶ Related to generic design is **franchise or corporate design**. National retail chains can break away from their rigid, formulaic designs and have in fact done so in communities where they have had to deal with strong design review policies and mechanisms. For example, the City of Chicago has an agreement with Walgreen's that defines how new Walgreen's stores should relate to the neighborhood in which they are located. The City of Rockford should explore taking a similar approach.

- ▶ **Residential design**, including that of single-family homes. Many people have noted with dismay the increasing prevalence of what have been termed "snout" houses. These are single- or two-family homes where the garage projects forward toward the street, becoming the most prominent feature of the house. This type of construction has been found to be objectionable not only for aesthetic reasons, but also because it limits the chances that one of these subdivisions will ever become a neighborhood. Another discouraging trend is for builders to use the same basic design throughout an entire subdivision and in virtually every subdivision they build. A more varied approach is needed and should be considered when the Zoning Ordinance is revised.



In assessing these developments, we need to determine how Rockford residents feel about how their community looks. This is most commonly done by means of a visual awareness survey or program. A similar approach was recently used by the Rock River Valley Green Communities group to elicit opinions on environmental preferences. Their survey included input on topics ranging from the appearance of natural areas to that of commercial signage. We need to research the known impacts of aesthetics on a community's economic health. We need to find out how other communities deal with the issues of residential and commercial design to garner new ideas and concepts. Then we need to put all this together to create a cohesive approach to dealing with design and appearance throughout the community. The final component will be to ensure that the City has sufficient staffing to enforce whatever standards are adopted.