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## Development's design passes 'Popsicle test'

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A 160-acre property dominated by prairie grasses northwest of Omaha could become a neighborhood designed around waterways, green spaces and winding boulevards that lead in every direction to community gathering places.

At one end of the main drive, for example, is a multi-denominational church or other civic space and, at the other, a "fire tower," a trio of fireplaces surrounded by benches topped by an observation tower.

Along the street, the buildings sit on irregular-shaped lots close to the curb, with no front-loading garages in sight; vehicle access is from alleys and lanes at the rear.

The buildings, though similar in architectural style - think Williamsburg, Va. - represent a wide range of sizes and prices, from single-family homes to six-plexes that look like mansions, and "live-work" rowhouses that have shops or offices on the first floor and living units above.

Such is the neighborhood at 168th and State Streets that was dreamed up, debated, plotted and illustrated during five days of intense planning last week in Omaha. The final presentation to a crowd of about 50 people was Saturday evening.

Developer Herb Freeman hired the national planning firm PlaceMakers to bring in 15 experts and work with public and private officials and other interested people in designing a master plan according to the principles of the New Urbanism concept of "new traditional development."

New traditional development seeks to re-recreate the types of places common before World War II - compact towns and villages with common areas that encourage walking and a diversity of people and uses. The motor vehicle is de-emphasized, and the goal is to give people a variety of destinations within a five-minute walk.

As Freeman said, "This design puts the person first and the car in the back."

And he said the New Urbanists like to say the plan should pass "the Popsicle test" - that an 8-year-old can walk somewhere for a Popsicle without having to cross busy streets.

Freeman, whose personal residence is currently the only structure on the site, said he expected to live there into his old age and then sell the property to someone else to develop. But Omaha's growth toward Bennington has been faster than he expected.

With development happening or planned on all sides of him, Freeman said, it became clear it was time to considering developing the land himself.

He has been involved in conventional subdivision development, but his research and

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travels sold him on the newtraditional approach, both in terms of its liveability and marketability.

Not only would such a neighborhood be a first for Omaha and stand out from the competition, he said, it also would allow a more dense development. A typical 160-acre subdivision would have about 350 lots. The Freeman plan calls for about 440 lots and up to 1,000 residences.

PlaceMakers' Susan Henderson said this Omaha planning session, or "charrette," stood out from others because of the amount of agreement the planners found among the participants.

She said the planners were stunned to find hills and not flat plains.

Freeman said Saturday that choosing his favorite aspect of the plan was like choosing a favorite child. But he said he likes "the incredible variety of interesting, walkable destinations."

"Every turn around every corner, there's something interesting," he said.

Among the gathering points included are a swimming pool, gazebo, wildflower meadows, two-person swings, an amphitheater, a fountain, a croquet lawn, a pear orchard, a hedge maze and a building with game rooms, classrooms and meeting rooms.

At Freeman's direction, the plan takes children into account.

He asked for some slopes to be steep enough for sledding, a scary-to-navigate footbridge over a shallow section of creek, an ice-skating pond and open "rambles" or natural play areas throughout.

"A good way to judge any New Urbanism project is, what is life like for a child?" said PlaceMakers' lead planner for the project, Bill Dennis.

Adults are not forgotten. Freeman pointed out a community wine cellar where residents have lockers to store collections and gather.

The street layout was determined by the land's topography because Freeman urged that the land be left as natural as possible, said Nathan Norris, PlaceMakers' director of implementation.

The spokes radiating off of the property's highest point make it easy to gather at a community center that would be established at Freeman's former residence, said Dennis.

"You can head up there and have no purpose in mind and meet everyone," he said.

The southwest corner of the project is designated for commercial development, but not in the conventional, face-the-intersection style.

Planners described a town center that would appear to be a farmstead. Farmers market stalls and buildings featuring a cafe or tavern face a crescent of green space with residences on the other side.

Freeman said he expects it to be years before the number of rooftops in the area attracts retailers, but his hope is the live-work units will jump-start that process by drawing smaller shops.

He said the next step - after catching up on his sleep - will be to work with engineering firm Lamp Rynearson & Associates, planning consultant Bob Peters and attorney Bob Huck to get the project in shape to present to city planners.

He said if all goes well, he could have city approvals by next June, begin the infrastructure work and have lots ready to build on by mid-2008.

Freeman said he's too far out from construction to set a price range, but he said his goal is to provide a range, from affordable to luxury estates. Some lots will allow "granny flats" or secondary residences.

"My definition of affordable," he said, "is the one used by New Urbanists: what a teacher can afford."

People interested in his project can stay tuned through his Web site - [www.whatsnewonstatestreet.com](http://www.whatsnewonstatestreet.com) - where he's currently running a name-the-neighborhood contest with a \$500 prize.

Contact the Omaha World-Herald [newsroom](#)