

Reflections on Town Center

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The fountain in Rockville Town Square is an object of curiosity for young children, as they run around the water, giggling as their clothes get damp from the spray. The open-air seating of the area restaurants provide city employees and residents an atmosphere of calm and quiet, while on the stage, students from nearby Richard Montgomery High School sit with binders and textbooks open, doing homework and talking about school.

With Federal Realty Investment Trust's announcement of a new grocery store, a taco restaurant and ice cream place, Rockville Town Center is growing in a way that not only provides for the community, but works to bring residents and visitors together according to Larry Giammo, former Rockville mayor.

For Tristan Paige, a returning sophomore at Richard Montgomery, the fountain area in the Town Square is a common place to hang out because of its proximity to the school. "There's cheap food, it's nice and some students live here," he said.

The stage is Dominique Estrera's favorite part of the Town Square. Estrera, who will be a senior next school year likes the stage because he can "dance whenever the mood strikes."

In addition to the food and convenience that the Town Square offers, Paige expressed interest in the VisArts Center on Gibbs Street. "I like to visit VisArts because it's nice, and I'm thinking about participating in summer classes," Paige said.

The VisArts is one of many places that works to bring the Rockville, and surrounding communities together. According to Karen Askin, a member of the Board of Directors, there are different parts of the organization to encourage and foster creativity.

The first floor of the art center according to Askin is used as a community arts exhibit. "Every month we try to feature art from a Montgomery County Public School teacher," Askin said. "It's a space to be able to connect with local residents."

The art center also maintains a resident artist program, where there are currently 18 artists working on various types of projects ranging from fabric, painting, and jewelry. Askin also added that the center provides year-long classes for adults, teens and young children as well as a large summer camp for kids.

"The center wouldn't exist without the city," Askin said, and they are currently working to get more people involved.

When asked about what they would like to see in the Town Square, there was a consensus among the group of students for a Chipotle. "There's one down the road about 10 minutes, but it would be better if it was in Town Square," said Paige.

Angela Barnes, another returning sophomore expressed a desire for more places that were activity oriented, while Calvin Chao and Ceril Venegas, also sophomores, joked about a swimming pool right next to the fountain.

Phyllis Marcuccio, the current mayor of Rockville said she is interested in seeing the Town Center grow, but "the city doesn't have control of the Town Center." Marcuccio said the area is owned by the developers and owners and "it's up to the developers and owners of Town Center to decide what types of businesses will best fit in the area."

The plan for the Town Center was spearheaded by Giammo, who served on the planning commission from 1996-2001, and was Rockville mayor from 2001-2007.

According to Giammo, his inspiration for a more "vibrant Town Center" came from the city's history, which Giammo says has "been without a heart for a good 40 years or so."

"Around the 50s, 60s, [Rockville] had a failing Main Street, with dilapidated buildings and crime," Giammo said. "Money became available through the Federal Government's urban renewal program, where 40 acres of the Town Center area was cleared," he said.

Despite revitalization efforts, Rockville continued to progress at a slow pace. According to Giammo, Rockville Mall opened in the 1970s, but failed to attract anchor stores and was torn down in the early 90s. After that, the theatre was built but "there's been little progress since then," said Giammo.

While serving on the planning committee, Giammo said he devoted work sessions specifically for imagining what a vibrant Town Center would look like, "that was more inviting to people, more intimate."

Giammo did express some disappointment with a lack of a super market which he said would "make a big difference to the degree that the Town Center survives," but is thrilled with how the Town Center is coming along.

"It's nice to see people there, and it's good to see there's a place in Rockville that's considered to be a viable Town Center," Giammo said.

Giammo said the Town Center seems to have a nice assortment of businesses and is hopeful that as time moves on, the city government will keep development at a high standard.

"When you look down Rockville Pike, toward the southern end, with those hi-rise residential buildings, it doesn't seem like the county is concerned so much with quality of life," Giammo said, naming some negative consequences of such growth like traffic congestion and overcrowding of area schools.

Although he expressed some excitement for the Town Center growth, he said he has developed some concerns over the last 6-12 months. "It's clear that three of the council members, John Britton, Piotr Gajewski and Mark Pierzchala don't seem to be concerned about development in terms of public infrastructure," Giammo said. "They don't seem to care about the negative consequences of unlimited growth."

Looking at areas along Rockville Pike, where there are hi-rise buildings on top of strip mall areas, Giammo asks "what is the goal?"

"They claim is 'smart growth' but it's not even within walking distance to Metro. Most of those people will have to drive, and they'll have small children," said Giammo, which would add to local congestion and overcrowding in schools.

Giammo hopes that Rockville Town Center will become a catalyst for high quality development in surrounding areas.