



THE INDEPENDENT DAILY NEWSPAPER FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA COMMUNITY SINCE 1868

The Daily Iowan

NEWSPAPER • ONLINE • TELEVISION

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 09, 2010 |

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River Landing project likely won't affect downtown

BY ALLIE WRIGHT | DECEMBER 07, 2010 7:20 AM

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Coralville has been making some big plans— around \$130 million to \$150 million worth.

"Our theory is that if we can do something different and we can attract more people to the area, the more complementary things we can do," Coralville City Administrator Kelly Hayworth said.

Councilors said they were excited about the development that could follow the Iowa River Landing project, which will include a hotel, expansion of the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics, and retail options.

And Coralville's push to attract diversity comes at a time when Iowa City is making plans to do the same.

Earlier this year, Iowa City officials invested \$45,000 in a feasibility study to evaluate the economic climate of downtown, suggesting it would benefit from more diversity.

A little more than a decade ago, in 1998, downtown Iowa City was directly affected by the opening of Coral Ridge Mall. The large mall immediately changed the economic landscape for downtown.

"It was the beginning of a really difficult time for downtown," said former Iowa City Mayor Ernie Lehman.

But officials aren't predicting the Iowa River Landing district will have the same effect on downtown businesses.

"Typically, the downtown type of shops fill more of a niche and more of a need of the market area they are in," said Randy Pilkington, the director of business and community services at the University of Northern Iowa.

The department conducted the feasibility study for Iowa City earlier this year. Pilkington said the Iowa River Landing will probably bring more retail activity and trade to the Iowa City and Coralville area.

Wendy Ford, Iowa City's economic-development coordinator, also said she is not worried about the future of downtown Iowa City and has not heard any negative feedback from business owners.

"I don't think it's going to detract from downtown in any way," she said.

She said each downtown Iowa City business has its own distinct personality and place in the commercial landscape. In fact, she said, the Iowa River Landing's shoppers may be curious to visit Iowa City as well.

Iowa City City Councilor Mike Wright said the contrast between Iowa City and the River Landing is too vast to expect an impact.

"I'm inclined to doubt it," he said. "Our downtown is very different from that."

Wright said he thinks the Iowa River Landing district is targeting mostly chains, which is not what downtown Iowa City features.

Mark Ginsberg, the owner of M.C. Ginsberg, 110 E. Washington St., said he thinks the River Landing development will broaden the area's tax base, among other benefits.

"I don't think it's going to have a diluting effect to the businesses that are downtown," he said, and he believes it will also increase the amount of services provided and force downtown Iowa City to become more creative.

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TODAY'S PRINT EDITION

Specific retailers and restaurants have yet to be chosen for the Iowa River Landing District; officials plan to be announce them within the next two months.

The City Council already unanimously approved the sale of the land located east of Second Street and south of Interstate 80 for a new 100-room hotel, owned by Lincoln McIlravy, a former Hawkeye wrestler, who owns Comfort Suites in Coralville.

While the project won't be completed until 2012, some University of Iowa students are indifferent about the prospect. UI sophomore Maggie Younger said she will most likely stick with shopping in Iowa City.

"I think shopping with some independent stores and supporting the local economy is really important to do," she said.

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Hawk34 2 days ago

Downtown shopping isn't affect by outside economic forces because there's no shopping there anyways. Noone wants to deal with the traffic or parking, and there's very little in the way of practical stores that the average person visits on any kind of regular basis.

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