



By Rodney Berry

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Mixed emotions about the county school expansion

Recent news that the Daviess County Board of Education plans to spend \$8.65 million on property and a new elementary school in southern Daviess County was not surprising. Officials have been replacing facilities systematically to make way for new schools: Audubon, Deer Park, East View, Meadow Lands and others. Once the newest addition is built at Sutherland, the West Louisville School will be the only elementary school in the county that is not relatively new.

If the county school board can replace drab older facilities with sparkling new ones, it probably should. Research conducted at UCLA, the University of Georgia and the Clearinghouse on Educational Policy and Management supports the claim that students attending schools in better condition outperform students in substandard buildings. Certainly residential patterns have changed, and the county school board is responding to those circumstances and projections. After all, they can't control where people want to live.

But while the county school board builds aggressively and points with pride to nearly all new facilities, not one new school has been constructed within the city school district since Mary Mitchell Elementary School (now the 5-6 Center) was built in the early 1960's. Since that period, 13 schools were built in the county district while 10 schools closed in the city. Since 1970, the city school system has lost half of its student population, while the county school population increased by 25 percent.

In the ten years from 1991 to 2001, the county school tax base increased \$830 million *more* than the city district tax base. Since then – by what, another half billion? The city schools stay competitive by levying a 31 percent higher property tax rate and because the system qualifies for 2.5 times more federal government support than the county schools, despite educating 60 percent fewer students.

New schools follow development, but they also attract development – and demands for public infrastructure – with them. Commercial and residential developments in suburbs and rural areas have positive impacts, but they also devour precious farmland, increase traffic and pollution, and lead to underdeveloped downtowns and nearby neighborhoods where public facilities and services already exist.

Developers absorb the cost of some infrastructure connected with suburban development, but taxpayers do as well. And since Owensboro residents also pay Daviess County taxes, they absorb an additional share of these public facilities and services in the sprawling suburbs.

Moreover, urban living is not always compatible with an agricultural culture. Subdivision dwellers become intolerant of slow-moving farm equipment on rural roads. Farmers who own large-scale chicken and hog factories don't have much sympathy for city people who build downwind from their operation and then complain about the odor.

Notwithstanding the public interest in preserving farms and timber, perhaps all of us would sell our land for the right price. But at what point will we look back and wonder how we could have been so indifferent to the detrimental effects of urban sprawl? When we pave over 1,000 more acres? 10,000 acres? When shopping centers stretch to Browns Valley?

Perhaps market forces are too strong to slow the pace of suburban development. But if we do nothing, if no one looks at the bigger picture, will our rural subdivisions connote affluence and our inner city neighborhoods and city schools inalterably be associated with low-income? Do we want to exacerbate the image of areas for the haves and areas for the have-nots? **Share your views**

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Urban investment strategy can curb sprawl

To slow down the pace of sprawling suburban development and the need for more schools and expanded public facilities and services, we need an effective urban investment strategy. We need to redevelop areas where infrastructure is already in place.

Owensboro's urban core would be well-served with upscale housing investments to attract a healthy mix of incomes. This would complement the fine subsidized housing programs that have enhanced the area and the green space that will soon accent the Germantown neighborhood.

Underdeveloped properties are sprinkled about and could be ideally suited for townhouse or mid-rise developments. There are infill development and second-story conversion opportunities. Several industrial buildings could be adapted into distinctive loft apartments and condominiums.

If the Owensboro Board of Education does not absorb its bonding capacity on the Owensboro High School athletic centerpiece, would the board consider a new downtown elementary school? A new downtown school would spark home building back to the area. An infusion of buying power could attract a grocery store, bakery, cafés, coffeeshops and other amenities. We could revitalize the area and enhance the city school tax base at the same time.

City officials, community leaders, neighborhood groups and downtown boosters need to challenge homebuilders, developers and investors to support the urban core. They need to be shown prototypes, features from other livable communities and creative ways to overcome obstacles to successful urban projects.

Our downtown and urban core must become an appealing place to live for the long term, not just a place one has to live until they can afford to move out. [Share your views](#)

Getting our arms around city-county tax issues

Daviess County Commissioner Jim Lambert's point during a recent city-county official luncheon was an important one to hear. During a discussion that drifted into the city-county unification issue, he corrected a point he frequently hears from city residents: that city residents absorb 60 percent of the cost of county government. Lambert said that is incorrect. Because city residents pay both city and county property taxes, they pay only 60 percent of the *property tax revenue*, not the entire budget. And property tax revenue comprises only \$4 million of the county's \$50 million budget.

City Commissioner Al Mattingly countered that it is not so simple. He said that much of county government revenue comes from flow back funds based on population formulas. Without the city population, county government would receive 60 percent less through those sources.

It is difficult to make comparisons of city and county government budgets because each entity has a fundamentally different budgeting system. Moreover, the roles and constitutional obligations of each government are vastly different.

Regardless of whether or not the unification initiative gains momentum, the issues that periodically bring attention to merger

do not go away. In Owensboro-Daviess County: there are tax inequities; there are complications in service delivery because of pockets of county property within the city limits; there are duplicating departments; there are two governing boards and two CEO's. Like it or not, those are the facts.

If the public perceives shortcomings in the current system, there are several ways to address them – unification being one. Our community – urban and rural, city and county – would be well-served by objective and reliable information, opportunities to listen and learn. Citizens need to examine options, tradeoffs, costs and consequences of choices available to us. In so doing, we can foster informed judgment and reduce the rancor that characterized the campaign 15 years ago. [Share your views](#)

Reasons to be bullish on our community

Notwithstanding recent disheartening reports on educational attainment and business development, there are plenty of good reasons to be bullish on Owensboro-Daviess County these days. Aggressive leadership, bright managers and a growing call to action contribute to a dynamic that we haven't sensed in a long time. Consider these projects and progress:

- The Advanced Technology Center on the Owensboro Community and Technical College campus with a business incubator program
- Proposed facilities and new degree programs, full-time faculty and graduate programs through Western Kentucky University – Owensboro
- Kentucky Wesleyan College's robust enrollment increases
- A "Learning Community" initiative that is generating hundreds of creative applications to facilitate education and life-long learning in workplaces, homes and community organizations
- Owensboro Medical Health System's cancer research and plans (through renovation or new construction) to offer facilities for the 21st Century
- New programs to spark entrepreneurialism through the Economic Development Corporation
- Owensboro Grain's biodiesel initiative
- If tax increment financing passes during this state legislative session, funds that otherwise would go to Frankfort can help finance community projects
- An energized Downtown Development Corporation that is thinking big, considering the synergy from coordinating major projects, and focusing on ways to maximize a \$50 million riverfront improvement
- A new and more visible public library with room to expand
- A plan developed by citizens (through PRIDE) to dramatically enhance the new community entrance from the Natcher Bridge
- Obstetricians who have stepped up to provide prenatal care for pregnant women referred by the health department after it was forced to discontinue its prenatal services (and other physicians and health care providers who serve the uninsured)

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- Dentists who do the same for disadvantaged children
- The Boulware Mission that, through its new home, will significantly expand its capacity to help the homeless and those with substance abuse issues
- A group of women who decide to give away \$100,00 per year and, in their first year, give away \$150,000

We salute all who have had a role in these and other impressive and exciting local initiatives.

Share your views

Keep the public in the loop

We concur with the March 1 *Messenger-Inquirer* editorial that challenged the appropriateness of a special Owensboro Board of Education meeting during a Kentucky School Boards Association convention in Louisville. The meeting may have been called simply out of convenience and it may have satisfied the legal requirements of open meetings laws. But it certainly was not within the spirit of the law.

Equally frustrating are public meetings in which the public is not allowed to speak, or public meetings that are difficult to find because there are no signs directing the public to the location, or public meetings in which officials don't even face the public or give them a place to sit. We've witnessed all of these practices in Owensboro.

Public input should be welcomed and valued *before decisions are made*. For example, we were under the impression that Owensboro Medical Health System was going to engage citizens in dialogue on the question of whether to build a new hospital or renovate the existing one. Maybe the official vote has not been taken, but for all practical purposes, it certainly appears that a decision has been made to build new. Public input should not be incidental in a \$500 million decision.

Openness and transparency builds trust and confidence in our public institutions. We urge elected officials, appointed members of public commissions and leaders of nonprofit organizations (who also have a *public* mission) to encourage and welcome citizen participation in public life.

Share your views

The minor league baseball opportunity: Will we drop the ball?

While our community sets aside the minor league baseball project (new stadium and Frontier League franchise) that boosters have been pitching to elected officials for six years, Marion, Illinois (pop. 19,000) has a \$12.5 million stadium under construction and the Southern Illinois Miners expect to play ball in May of this

year – two months from now.

The project was financed through a public-private partnership and tax increment financing. The team owner is local and this will make the 11th club in the Frontier League. The league is expanding to 12 teams. Will the Owensboro franchise be the 12th?

With five deposits in hand from other interested communities, Frontier League Commissioner Bill Lee is talking about expanding to 16 teams. If these slots go to other communities, there are few – if any – league options for a market our size in this region.

Share your views

Note: Rodney Berry is a member of the Bring Back Baseball Committee.

What will bring our young people back home?

One of our boys graduated from college a couple of years ago and the other is a sophomore in college. It's interesting that, when they call home, they may ask about how the riverfront and minor league baseball projects are coming along. They may ask if the new library is open. They're pleased to hear that the ice rink may be replaced soon, that RiverPark is developing a Mystery Writer's Festival, and that a cool-looking new restaurant-bar will soon open across from Brescia University.

Job and educational opportunities move us around. But an increasing number of young people decide where they want to live and then seek employment once they're settled in. Richard Florida examined this trend in his landmark work, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. This well-educated "creative" class is not just comprised of artists and writers, but software engineers and researchers and entrepreneurs. And they are drawn to cities, in large part, because of their amenities.

Do our community priorities and public budgets reflect an acknowledgement of these trends and this need to invest in quality of life amenities? We cannot ignore infrastructure and public protection, but are we investing enough in things that will make our community uniquely attractive and appealing to the workforce of tomorrow?

The City of Owensboro is in the process of spending nearly \$40 million on drainage projects. My sons never ask about drainage. I don't think they will be attracted to a city because of its drainage. Drainage is very important, but so are entertainment districts, cafés and coffeeshops, theaters that feature foreign films, fountains and tree-lined boulevards and plazas where musicians play for tips.

Let's find the right balance and keep our community competitive.

Share your views

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