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Morristown in the middle: Leaders envision town's sustainable future

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Carol Anton walks along a path on the roof garden at 14 Maple Avenue, one of the greenest buildings in the state. Built more than three years ago by the Morristown Parking Authority with help from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, it contains a three-story bio-wall to filter air, thermal wells, and solar panels. / Daily Record 2010

Written by Abbott Koloff | Staff Writer

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MORRISTOWN — Someday, if the Speedwell Avenue redevelopment goes as envisioned, people will walk along a corridor to get from retail shops to a park surrounded by residential buildings in an area now the domain of garbage trucks.

The neighborhood around the Morristown train station one day might be home to additional residential buildings as more people start the day by walking instead of getting into a car.

And a change in traffic patterns could make it easier for pedestrians to get to the Green, the focus of many town activities but also a park that remains isolated from the rest of the downtown because

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it's surrounded by what amounts to a traffic circle.

Those are some ideas being discussed by planners and other environmental advocates for the seat of Morris County, a town that's been at the forefront of the sustainability movement. Some efforts are overseen by the town's Office of Sustainability, run by Paul Miller and funded with help from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation. Others are proposals that will be considered as the town's planners get public input for proposed additions and changes to the master plan.

The town is home to a building considered one of the greenest in the state, a combination parking garage and office building on Maple Avenue that contains a three-story bio-wall to filter air, thermal wells, and solar panels on the roof. It was built more than three years ago by the town Parking Authority with help from the Dodge Foundation, which became a tenant.

Miller said the town has embarked on several new sustainable efforts. They include a recent deal with Reliant Energy that he said will save the town \$250,000 in electricity costs over the next two years while also providing 50 percent of the power from renewable sources. And the town has plans to use efficiency software developed by a Parsippany company called Revelstone.

"We might look at how many vehicle miles our fleet travels," Miller said.

As Morristown steps up its sustainability efforts, Miller said it plans to seek a higher level of recognition from Sustainable Jersey, a state certification program that's part of a partnership that includes the League of Municipalities, the College of New Jersey, the state Department of Environmental Protection and the state Board of Public Utilities. Municipalities achieve certification by getting a certain amount of points for each of their sustainable efforts.

Abbott Koloff: 973-428-6636; akoloff@njpressmedia.com

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Miller said the town is preparing an application for silver certification, which requires 350 points and so far has been achieved by just eight other municipalities in the state. Morristown had 150 points in its last application, just enough to qualify for bronze. That puts it in a four-way tie for fifth place in Morris County, according to information provided by Sustainable Jersey.

Town officials also plan to make amendments to the master plan with an emphasis on transportation and land use. Town planners say they plan to hold public discussions about those issues, focusing on areas around the train station and the Green.

Those discussions will include what to do about the clogged intersection of Spring Street, Early Street and Speedwell Avenue. The original Speedwell Avenue redevelopment plan included an \$8 million realignment of that intersection, and the demolition of some nearby buildings, but town planners hired by Mayor Tim Dougherty two years ago said it might make matters worse by creating a

the latest proposal.

Phil Abramson, a planner with Jonathan Rose Companies, said officials will look at other ways to reduce congestion, such as changing the traffic flow before cars get there and doing a better job of coordinating traffic signals in the area that are operated by state, county and local authorities. But there are no obvious solutions, he said, and more evaluations are needed.

"If I knew what should be done, it would be done," Abramson said.



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Jonathan Rose played a big part in changing the Speedwell Avenue Redevelopment plan to include more green elements. The original plan proposed an interior courtyard surrounded by buildings facing away from it. The new proposal calls for buildings facing the interior where pedestrian walkways and a park would be constructed.

"It was about creating a place people will enjoy," Abramson said.

He said a proposal to produce a park-like landscape at Headquarters Plaza on the other side of Speedwell Avenue has "enormous potential." He also said he'd like to see more residential buildings to go along with the Highlands at Morristown Station, taking the place of warehouses and focusing development around mass transportation. And he was supportive of a local movement examining ways to integrate the Green with the surrounding area.

"How many major parks do you know of that have a traffic circle around it?" he asked.

The Morristown Pedestrian Project, using federal grant money, has been looking at ways to improve the area around the green for walking.

Composed of a coalition of groups, members of the project have discussed ways to change traffic patterns, perhaps making roads around the Green two-way instead of one-way and reducing the number of lanes.

"If cars are more easily routed, they won't be cutting over, so pedestrians can feel safer," said Denise Lanza, assistant deputy director of the Morris County Park Commission, a member of the coalition.

She said meetings are planned with the Morristown Partnership, along with state, county and town authorities to discuss various proposals. Then, she said, it will be up to someone else, perhaps a group yet to be formed, to help refine and implement them.

Abbott Koloff: 973-428-6636; akoloff@njpressmedia.com

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