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Play lays groundwork for city's future

By ANDREW BROWN , Dispatch Staff Writer

ONEIDA - The City of Oneida has a new master plan that will guide the city's development for the next 15 years. The Oneida City Common Council adopted the 2005 Comprehensive Plan at a meeting last Tuesday. "It looks at what we have as a city, and where we want to be in five, 10 and 15 years," said Cassie Rose, the director of the Department of Planning and Development for the City of Oneida.

The plan, which took over a year to complete, was drafted by the Troy firm River Street Planning & Development, in conjunction with Oneida City Engineer Jim Bacher and the Department of Planning. City officials also consulted a 25-person steering committee, comprised of Oneida residents, that helped decide what issues needed to be addressed by the new blueprint.

According to Rose, the new schematic takes into account multiple aspects of the city, such as infrastructure, zoning, housing, education and economic factors, in order to provide city officials with a list of actions they can take to create the changes they want.

The plan, which cost about \$40,000 to create, is broken down into seven basic goals, which each contain a set of specific actions that are designed to help achieve them. The goals include, among others, upgrading and maintaining the city's infrastructure, re-establishing the downtown as the city's central business district and providing a variety of high quality housing opportunities.

For each specific action listed under the schema, there is a cost estimate, a list of sources for funding and a timeline of when the action should be taken: years 1 to 3, 4 to 7 or 8 to 15.

"It guides the council in making decisions every month," Rose said.

She added that the blueprint helps the council prioritize by helping them figure out which projects would be most beneficial for the city to undertake at a specific time.

"I think the whole plan has helped us to see the big picture for the city," said Oneida City Councilor Wendy Cary.

One of the main issues that will be affected by the implementation of the new plan is zoning. Rose said one problem with the current zoning ordinance is the lack of areas specifically designed for condominiums and townhouses, which are viable housing options for people with grown children that no longer need to live in a large house.

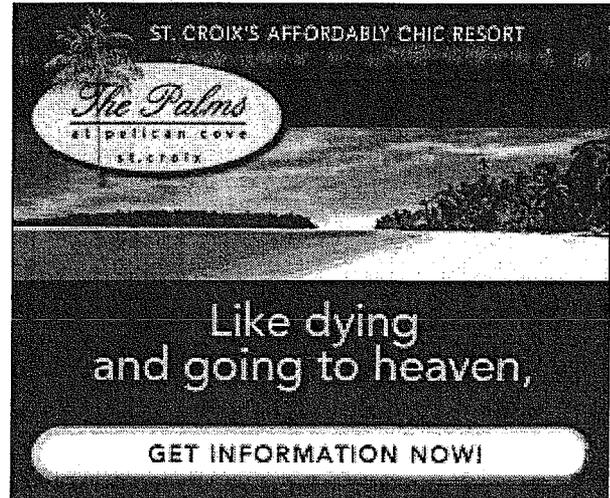
The new schematic will help the common council make amendments to the zoning ordinance, updating the city's zones to accommodate the way people live today. Other changes may help people work at home more easily.

The new blueprint will also allow city officials to apply for grants, which will bring in government money to help the city undertake costly projects.

"If you are going to apply for grants one of the first things you need to do is to show how it is part of the comprehensive plan," Rose said.

Oneida Mayor Leo Matzke said that the primary challenge in drafting the plan was gathering the data, which was undertaken

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by River Street. City officials then needed to decide on how to create smooth transitions from residential to commercial zones in places where the city is growing. The next challenge for the council to undertake will be examining the rest of the zoning ordinance and making necessary changes.

One area of the city that the plan will focus on is downtown. Matzke believes that the downtown section of the city will be primarily used to house the offices of professionals, and any businesses or retail stores located in the area will benefit from catering to them.

Matzke believes that ultimately the new plan will allow city officials to navigate the decision-making process without getting stuck in endless negotiations, which has been a problem in the past.

"When I first took office a little over a year ago, the planning commission and the council had reached a stalemate in terms of decision making for city growth," he said.

Rose agreed with Matzke about the benefits of the new plan to the city's decision-making process.

"The biggest benefit is the fact that it will help the administration," she said. "It will guide them in their decisions."

Although Cary said it was hard to estimate when people will begin to see changes as a result of the adoption of the plan, she said the council would begin working on it soon.

"I know that we are not just going to take this plan and put it on a shelf," she said. "We'll be chiseling away at it here and there."

* Copies of the 2005 Comprehensive Plan are available for people to view at the Oneida City Clerk's office at 109 North Main St. in Oneida and the Oneida Library at 220 Broad St. in Oneida. The plan will also soon be available on the Internet.

The Seven Goals of the 2005 Comprehensive Plan

1. Provide a transportation system that alleviates congestion while providing adequate provisions for pedestrians.
2. Upgrade and maintain the city's infrastructure.
3. Re-establish the downtown as the city's central business district.
4. Provide a variety of high quality housing opportunities.
5. Improve land management by updating the city's zoning ordinance.
6. Develop a focused citywide economic development plan.
7. Utilize potential and existing recreational and educational facilities to support opportunities for youth and area residents.