

A DOWNTOWN IS DOABLE FOR RP

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Sunday's editorial, "Identity crisis: RP wishes for what it can't have -- an old-fashioned downtown," made it sound like Rohnert Park can never have a downtown.

The editorial said that Rohnert Park and Windsor both began as suburbs and shopping centers. That part is correct. Twelve years ago, Windsor and Rohnert Park were both lacking downtowns. The difference is that the more than 5,000 people who attended Windsor's party celebrating their new Town Green and Phase 1 downtown developments would say that today Windsor most definitely has a "there, there."

What can be learned from this tale of two suburbs? Windsor did not achieve a downtown by renaming streets and providing a series of design amenities. What it did do, though, is very simple.

It replaced its typical zoning code in the area designated for downtown with what is called a "form-based code." As opposed to conventional zoning codes that prescribe that individual property owners design and develop their property as auto-based sprawl, Windsor's form-based code laid out new streets in an interconnected fashion, created the Town Green and specified required building heights, sidewalk widths, and pedestrian-friendly building frontages such as storefronts and arcades.

This new code created a strong vision of what downtown Windsor would someday look like.

And today it is beginning to look just like that vision. The City Council has been unwavering in its commitment to its vision for the downtown. Once the plan was in place, the council dedicated redevelopment funds for the major public improvements as envisioned in the plan, such as the redesign of Windsor River Road and the purchase and completion of the Town Green. Once the city's level of commitment to the plan was firmly established, the private sector has been steadily building out the vision.

In Windsor it has taken about 10 years to go from a suburb without distinction to a town with a budding downtown. There is no reason for other suburban communities to feel that they can never have what Windsor has achieved in a relatively short period of time.

The key is to find a desirable area for a downtown, at the intersection of two major streets, and replace the existing zoning code in that area with a form-based code that lays out new streets, buildings, plazas and parks. In fact, old, declining shopping centers can be ideal sites for new downtowns.

Windsor isn't the only city in Sonoma County that is using a form-based code to tell developers exactly what they want to see in their towns. Petaluma recently adopted a type of form-based code called a SmartCode, a standardized code that is available for cities to use with a license fee.

The Central Petaluma Specific Plan and SmartCode identifies streets, parks, waterfront access, building heights, frontages and block perimeters for a 400-acre section of their historic downtown. Private developers have already stepped up to the plate based on the clarity of the city's new vision.

Cotati is also distinguishing itself in code reform. Currently, the city is in the process of replacing their old sprawl-based code citywide with a SmartCode.

And, Windsor's vision has now extended beyond the downtown. City leaders have adopted a form-based code for the Shiloh Road area, and has agreed to fund the design of a form-based code in two additional sensitive areas in town.

It's a shame that Rohnert Park spent \$60,000 on a consultant whose recommendations fall so short of the mark. I agree with your editorial statement that, "For \$60,000, the consultant recommended renaming Rohnert Park Expressway to Rohnert Park Boulevard, adopting a series of design amenities along this main street and expanding collaboration with Sonoma State University. While these are welcome improvements, no one is fooled into believing that Rohnert Park will have a downtown in the usual sense."

The good news is that if Rohnert Park decides this year to have a downtown and, like Windsor, creates a form-based code backed up by a unanimous commitment to the city's future, it is possible that 10 years from now they can be celebrating the grand opening of their new downtown just as Windsor did this spring.

Yes, it's more than changing the name of a street and adding pretty street furnishings. But it is doable, and the result would be a real "there, there" for all Rohnert Park residents. Lois Fisher is an urban designer and a member of the Windsor Planning Commission.