

“Toast the Town”: Development announcement Friday, August 6, 2021

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of August 2, 2021)

Wondering what is “Toast the Town?” Put it on your calendar NOW: Friday, August 6, 2021, from 5 pm to 7 pm on Wilson Street for a fun time and a special announcement about the future of Oak Ridge.

As this is a Historically Speaking column, let's look back a bit before talking about the future. A future that is becoming a reality!

During the Manhattan Project when Oak Ridge came into being, Jackson Square was the planned as the most central commercial district and known as “Townsite.” Located in what was expected to be the center of a town planned for 3,000 people, but the town quickly grew to 13,000 and finally 75,000 by August 1945. By the way, do you know how Jackson Square got its name? Neither do I...

Rather than a standard downtown with housing surrounding it, there were many small neighborhood centers throughout the city. And remember, Oak Ridge was built laying on the south side of Black Oak Ridge and in East Fork Valley. Both of which run northeast to southwest. This elongated feature of ridges and valleys in East Tennessee did not easily lend itself to a central downtown.

In addition to Jackson Square, the smaller neighborhood retail locations were Grove Center, Jefferson Center, Middletown Center, West Village Center, East Village Center, and even small retail establishments without names, but NO true downtown center. Oak Ridge was established as local communities with schools, theaters, retail stores, recreation centers, dormitories, and houses all arranged within small local communities.

There was even Happy Valley, a construction village of 15,000 located near the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant construction site south of Highway 58. A school, cafeteria, recreation center, service station and other retail establishments were there as well. Also located nearby was the Bacon Davis camp, another construction village.

So, you see, Oak Ridge was not established with a downtown area centrally located. A map included in *The Oak Ridge Story*, by George Robinson, published in 1950, had a section near where Main Street Oak Ridge and Wilson Street is located today that was designated as a “new business area.” Guilford Glazer built a shopping center there in 1955.

Even today we can't qualify as a “Main Street” city in Tennessee's Main Street Program because we do not have a “traditional downtown.” But that may well be changing...

The Oak Ridge Downtown District along Wilson Street, between South Tulane Avenue and South Rutgers Avenue, is intended to support a centrally located, walkable, urban district that generates daytime and evening activities for residents and visitors. Now, THAT is a “downtown.”

The idea of a 'central downtown' has been in at least eight Oak Ridge city plans, starting with the first Skidmore Owens and Merrill master plan in 1948. Since then, the idea has obviously become a long-held community desire. We just have not yet been able to act upon these various plans.

Now, there are even more reasons than just that community longing for a 'gathering place. For example, the positive tax base trajectory. See link to short video that describes this well. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVD01WUm0oA&t=23s>

Some types of development and businesses will only locate in walkable, urban settings as described in the above video rather than the mostly suburban developments that we now have. We can provide a welcoming location in the Oak Ridge Downtown District!

Pat Postma has been an ardent supporter of the new vision for downtown from the get-go. She says “This is a win-win, because these mixed-use, multi-story areas generate more tax revenues per acre for cities

“Toast the Town”: Development announcement Friday, August 6, 2021

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of August 2, 2021)

than any other type of use. This new area along Wilson Street could provide as much as \$5 million in new tax revenues to the city. And if there is anything we learned during the COVID-19 quarantines and closures, it is the value of coming together with our friends or with new acquaintances face-to-face to share ideas and laughter along with food and drink.”

Additionally, our federal employers tell us that they find it challenging to compete for some of the best and brightest scientists, who prefer to live and 'play' in a walkable urban district. Again, our plan is to create this type of environment along Wilson Street.

The City Blueprint exercise engaging the community for input taught us that Oak Ridgers want to be “uniquely Oak Ridge” and not a carbon copy of other towns. This gives us the chance to put our fingerprints on any development in the district.

In response to the community input, a "Downtown Vision" was crafted in 2019. Since then, a new zoning district, just for downtown has been developed, a sizable chunk of vacant, developable land has been accumulated, and dozens of potential developers have been courted.

Officials of the city have put in place many pieces of the necessary foundation to be ready for this next phase in Oak Ridge. Now, the Oak Ridge Land Bank is about to release a Request for Proposals, to solicit developers to build this walkable urban district - where we can work, live, eat, drink, play - and gather.

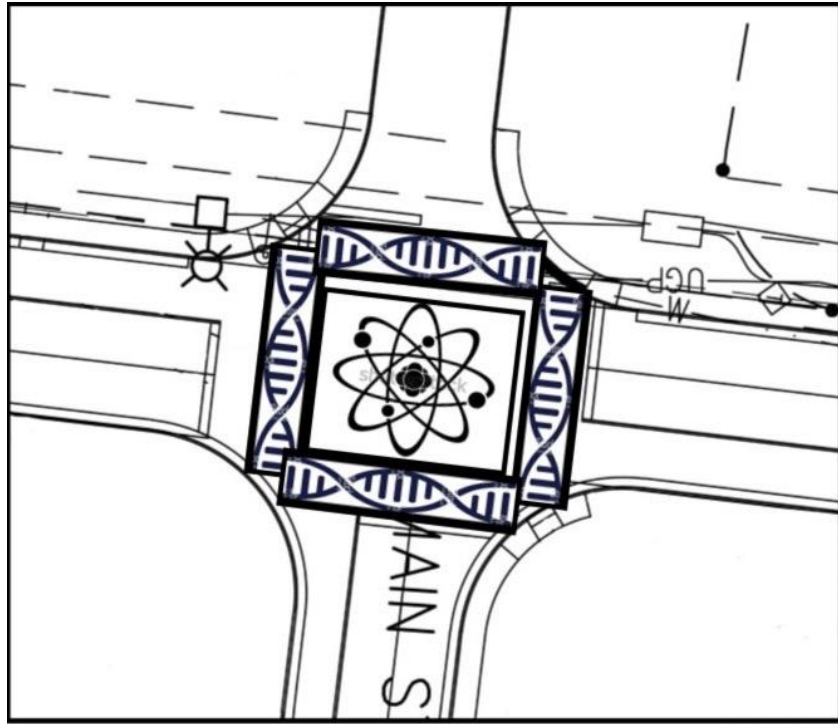
Come out on August 6, from 5 pm to 7 pm, to **Toast the Town**, on Wilson Street, across from the new TownePlace Suites Marriott hotel, enjoy a craft beer with your neighbors, and hear the formal announcement of this call for development. We are really going to make things happen this time.

You can be a part of it. Just come on down to “Toast the Town!”



An artist rendering of the future Downtown as the “Downtown Vision” becomes a reality!

“Toast the Town”: Development announcement Friday, August 6, 2021
(As published in The Oak Ridger’s Historically Speaking column the week of August 2, 2021)



Another artist rendering showing an intersection that features the atomic symbol and crosswalks painted to depict the DNA double helix structure