

Where's the Turkish Bathhouse?

Analysis of Lowe's Park Hotel and Residences Concept compared to The Downtown Area Advisory Committee Report

Submitted by Paul Andersen, DAAC Moderator (March 10, 2015)

The Lowe design team made its initial public presentation of a preliminary design concept at a public meeting of the Basalt Town Council and Planning and Zoning Commission on March 10, 2015.

Lowe announced that it had followed the findings of the Downtown Area Advisory Committee (DAAC) by applying DAAC's five guiding principles to the Park Hotel and Residences design concept:

- 1) Connect the Town to the Rivers
- 2) Preserve significant physical and visual access to the Rivers
- 3) Improve Lions Park
- 4) Allow density to drive revitalization
- 5) Provide a "There-There" destination for residents and guests alike

DAAC, a volunteer citizens committee, met over a ten-week period this winter, tasked with applying the Our Town mapping principles to three key parcels in Basalt's historic downtown core. The Community Development Corporation (CDC) property, now under development consideration by Lowe, is one of these parcels.

In physical layout, the Lowe concept achieves many of the DAAC recommendations: River connections are made through street-like corridors between buildings, open view planes from Midland Avenue to the river park, and a *Woonerf* ('livable street' where cars are subordinate to pedestrians and bicycles) that enters the site through a prominent gateway.

The Lowe concept shows a more open Lion's Park (sans Caboose) and suggests a "There-There" in and around the proposed new hotel by featuring an amphitheater and commercial/public open spaces, portions of which are 'hardscaped' with decks and patios.

What Lowe has not yet fully addressed at this preliminary stage were two of DAAC's core values:

- 1) Don't lose our Small Town charm
- 2) Promote Vitality and Sustainability (Physical & Economic)

Where is the Turkish Bathhouse?

In the most rudimentary and preliminary mapping concepts that emerged from the Our Town process over a year ago, one map was marked with a “Turkish Bathhouse” near the Roaring Fork River, adjacent to the CDC property.

While this dubious amenity became a humorous symbol for social and cultural diversity, it nonetheless reflected a daring, playful, “outside the box” mindset that characterized the community approach of the Our Town process.

Comparatively, the preliminary Lowe concept is a conservative commercial development that pushes no new boundaries at the conceptual phase. It is comprised basically of blocks of residences with a hotel next door. There are no specific provisions for small town character or “characters,” nor is there a component for community vitality as it relates to social diversity.

Whether or not Basalt’s social makeup is expressed by a Turkish Bathhouse, the Lowe design team has been challenged to think outside the box in order to address what the DAAC report enumerates as top community goals:

- preserving rural, small town values
- accommodating economic development and social vibrancy
- keeping Basalt small, intimate and vital

To Lowe’s credit, its design team crunched a tight deadline and made a huge leap of faith by taking the broad brush strokes of the DAAC report and applying them to a three-dimensional concept. Lowe shifted the Our Town and DAAC visions from theory to actuality, from vision to concept. Where DAAC decided not to mire in the minutia of design details and instead step back to overarching development goals, the Lowe team advanced the process with conceptual details now subject to scrutiny.

Lowe has asked for reactions and feedback, soliciting the community to help make the development fit with the ideals of the community.

Connectivity between downtown and the rivers

Working directly from the DAAC report, Lowe established that its project would engage downtown Basalt with the proposed new river park and invite, through welcoming pedestrian channels, the flow of people between them.

A sticking point, however, is how much open space (60% of developable land – 80% of the overall river park - Lowe) is actually green space available to the public. On this point DAAC clearly stipulated: “Maintain as much public green space as possible at the River Front Parcel on the Roaring Fork.”

From this directive the height/density equation proposed by Lowe, with 3.5-story structures, becomes a tradeoff for less horizontal sprawl and more open space for parks and people.

Improve Lions Park

While Lowe gave a nod to improving Lions Park, possibly moving Town Hall, the Wyly Art Center, and the Chamber of Commerce caboose to new locations, there was nothing in the conceptual plan for having Lions Park absorb development density from the Lowe's project at River Front Parcel.

DAAC had favored this idea as "a land swap between the developer and the Town as a way of maximizing the River Front's public green space and providing cross-street development dynamics with opposing structures along Two Rivers Road where it divides Lions Park and River Front Parcel."

Allow density to drive revitalization

Lowe's design concept offers residential and commercial density for Basalt's downtown core, something DAAC found "is necessary to attract people and make Basalt vibrant and economically viable."

Cautionary words in the DAAC report are "appropriate density" that "must not overpower Basalt's rural character and charm, but should offer affordable housing opportunities that invite young families and eclectic 'characters' into the social mix. Cultural amenities should be part of the dynamic by bringing a festival spirit to the downtown core."

The DAAC report specifically recommends:

1. Residential development should be compact, affordable and multi-faceted.
2. Include vitalizing activities downtown
 - Affordable and mixed housing
 - Performing arts and Wyly Art Center
 - Festival amenities/outdoor market
 - Social mixing places – coffee houses, brewery, Turkish Bath House, etc.
3. Protect the rural, historic character of old town Midland Avenue.
 - Promote a funky, eclectic style.
 - Maintain Basalt's authentic western atmosphere.
 - Respect Midland Avenue's period architecture

Lowe cannot be expected to fulfill the full range of DAAC's broad goals and visions for the entire downtown rejuvenation. However, its conceptual plans so far do not include structural context for social diversity as there is no affordable housing component in the hotel/residences concept.

What the Lowe concept does achieve are the following DAAC recommendations on revitalization:

- Provide a diverse package of low-impact municipal parking solutions within or near downtown which are visually pleasing.
- Create festival amenities/outdoor market
- Provide social mixing places – coffee houses, brewery,
- Encourage a phased plan
- Multi-season uses and activities

Putting the “There There”

DAAC placed high value on Basalt’s sense of place, calling the “There There” a matter of individual taste and style that equates with “pride of place,” “heart and soul” or the “integration of life and spirit.”

The DAAC report states: “Basalt’s ‘There There’ is an aggregate of funkiness, down home comfort, authenticity, surprise, discovery, identity, irreverence, and vitality. These enlivening values are best realized through an organic evolution of community influences that conspire serendipitously to bring people together within a unique social and physical context. The sum of the experience should be attractive, fun, inspiring, unique and memorable.”

These goals are admittedly esoteric. They advocate for community values that the Lowe concept strives to achieve with its park design and commercial public spaces, the combination of which provides an attractive venue for the above DAAC goals.

What the Lowe concept could take further into consideration is how its conceptual design and eventual development can accommodate the following DAAC recommendations:

1. Establish an entrepreneurial atmosphere rather than a tourist contrivance.
2. Place an emphasis on natural landscapes and features rather than confining downtown with looming, overshadowing structures.
3. Encourage and recognize diversity in every walk of community life and every commercial enterprise.
4. Invite an entrepreneurial spirit by keeping open opportunities for creative self-expression and community vibrancy.