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## Dean mulls Madison makeover

By: Christine Kreyling, News Correspondent  
Posted: Monday, October 20, 2008 12:00 am

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Madison's retail corridor along Gallatin Pike, below, with its storefronts pulled close to the street, is an example of a Nashville area that doesn't look or work so well. *Matthew Williams/The City Paper*  
Karl Dean is going back to school and he's taking Madison in his backpack.

From Nov. 9-11, Dean will attend the Mayors' Institute on City Design in Charleston, S.C., along with seven other civic chieftains. Each mayor is asked to bring along a specific case study for analysis and advice from mayoral peers and an eight-member team of planning, economic development and design professionals.

Dean's case study is the Madison commercial district, which lies along Gallatin Pike from just past Briley Parkway through Old Hickory Boulevard and onto the Rivergate area.

The idea behind the institute is that a mayor is, for better or worse, the city's chief urban designer due to control of planning and public works departments and the power to set fiscal priorities. But a city's head politico rarely brings to the job much expertise in planning and design. The intention of the institute is to help mayors earn more marks in the "better" column.

"What we're teaching the mayors is to ask smart questions," said Jess Zimbabwe, the director of the Mayors' Institute. "They have access to planners and consultants, but a mayor has a unique ability to make demands of developers. We enable these officials to ask questions on behalf of the public."

"Most mayors usually think short term, for re-election, about things like crime rates," Zimbabwe adds. "We advise them that the physical form they give to their cities is a mayor's long term legacy. And then we ask them what's the most important project in their cities."

Two of Dean's predecessors who attended institute sessions both brought downtown projects as case studies. Phil Bredesen presented the new main branch of the public library in 1996, when he was still looking for a site for the building. In 2000, Bill Purcell put the redevelopment of Rolling Mill Hill on the table.

Dean says he "considered several downtown locations: the thermal site, Deaderick Street now that the buses are moving, and Commerce Street, which hasn't been talked about much." He ultimately decided that Madison's commercial corridor "appealed the most for setting a positive tone that we might duplicate in other parts of the city."

There are plenty of other parts of the city that look and work — make that don't look so good and don't work so well — just like Madison.

Most of Nashville's historic pikes sport remnants of traditional neighborhood commercial centers, with storefronts pulled close to the street, on-street parking and sidewalks. The surrounding fabric reflects a later, more car-centric approach; shopping centers, strip malls and big boxes divided from a wide roadway by out-front surface parking with recurring curb cuts. Not to mention the cacophony of signage and webs of utility lines.

Finding an environment more hostile to pedestrian and other alternative transportation modes would be difficult. Fixing Madison's would be well worth duplicating.

Dean finds strengths in Madison that specifically qualify the area for fixer-upper status. He notes "its

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heritage," from the first church west of the Cumberland Mountains in 1785, to Davidson County's first shopping center, Madison Square, in 1956.

Other positives in the mayor's eye include Madison's "proximity to downtown, good public infrastructure, strong and unified leadership committed to revitalization. And the Planning Department is already involved out there" through its update to Madison's community plan that began public workshops in August and will shape growth and development in the area for the next seven to ten years.

Madison's public infrastructure includes three major routes to downtown — Gallatin Pike, the Interstate 65/24 stretch and Ellington Parkway — which make the central city "a 20-minute drive," says Councilman Jim Forkum, who's the incoming chair of the Madison Chamber of Commerce and splits representation of the Madison business district with Councilman Michael Craddock. The buses serving Gallatin Pike carry Nashville's highest ridership — 93,523 trips in August, according to MTA spokesperson Patricia Harris-Morehead.

That ridership, along with the residential density of the area, makes Gallatin Pike "a good candidate for bus rapid transit (BRT)," Dean says. In this transit mode, buses are given priorities to make them faster and more efficient, and thus a more attractive alternative to cars. Such priorities can include dedicated bus lanes off-limits to cars, preferential treatment of buses at intersections and signals, as well as special bus infrastructure, such as turnouts and boarding islands that make embarking and disembarking more fluid.

The mayor points out that a BRT pilot project "is in the capital budget because I'm serious about this." When capital expenditures are unfrozen, "the Gallatin route is the first one I'll look at." Dean acknowledges, however, that there are challenges. "Madison's commercial areas have downscaled, a hospital closed and the [Madison Square] mall is struggling."

This commercial erosion is the result of changes in demographics and the residential market, according to Forkum.

"In the last five to 10 years, many of the old-timers, who'd lived in their houses for 50 years, have moved out," Forkum said. "Many of their homes have turned into rental, with a more transient population" and a decline in property maintenance standards, he explains.

"And unlike in other parts of the city, the crime rate in Madison has gone up," Forkum added, pointing particularly to an increase in commercial robberies, some of which have involved homicides. "And some people have been held up in their own driveways."

Zimbabwe, who was in Nashville last week for a windshield survey of Madison in preparation for Dean's presentation at the institute, says the area's predicament is a national phenomenon.

"Hundreds of cities have second ring suburbs like Madison. They're sandwiched between a rock and a hard place. They lack the renewed energy of the downtown and older first ring neighborhoods. And they've been leapfrogged by newer housing and retail in the outer suburbs."

Zimbabwe sees the four lanes — plus turn lanes — of Gallatin Pike that blast through the business corridor as the biggest planning challenge.

"It's hard to have a town center, like the merchants want, when you take your life in your hands to cross the street."

She explains that moving as many cars as quickly as possible through Madison to the outer suburbs and Sumner County, the traffic-engineering goal, "isn't conducive to recreating a center. The mayor will have to spend some political capital to take on" the Tennessee Department of Transportation.

Zimbabwe, however, sees few alternatives.

"Further change is going to come," he said. "The local leadership can manage that change positively and provide some incentives for that change. Or they can stick with the status quo and there will be further decline, further disinvestment in residential and retail property."

Dean says he's doing his homework preparing for his crash course in master building. The mayor admits, however, to one "repitiation: "I won't have any [Metro] planners with me. The rules are that I go alone."

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#### Member Opinions:

By: [WickedTribe](#) on 10/20/08

Even though I don't live in Madison and am therefore partially jealous of the attention, I do think Madison needs it more than any other part of town. Madison has been ignored and falling into decay for a long time.

By: [yank283](#) on 10/20/08

Yes, I think a good choice. The city should look at Antioch next (another 2nd ring city). That area of town seems to be virtually ignored on a regular basis and seems to have even more renters. Hopefully it's not too late.

By: [MamaG](#) on 10/20/08

I have to agree with you, wicked. I did grow up in Madison and while I don't live there now, I do still utilize many businesses there and would like to see improvements made. There are many small businesses that are situated in buildings that are partially or mostly vacant. If more people looked in that area, they might find rental space to their liking and affordability. Traffic would be easier to get to and go from work; there are many good little restaurants around that could use the business; major grocery stores around; churches, etc...

I say, bring on the changes!

By: [Time for Truth](#) on 10/20/08

Gallatin Road is about ten miles of ugly. And not just in Madison, the ugly hangs on all the way into East Nashville.

These 'makeovers' need to be done without abusing property rights, but the naysayers will find that

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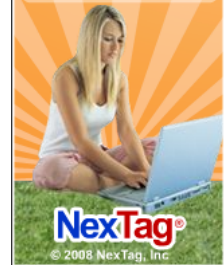
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even their leaky boats will rise with the tide of improvement.

By: **BigPapa** on 10/20/08

Yes, the Gallatin Rd area is terrible- all the way through.

The problem with Madison, and in Antioch, is that these areas were built up in the 50-70's so there isn't that classic home like those here in East Nashville. The ramblers and raches just do not have the same appeal as the Victorians and Bungalows.

By: **Kosh III** on 10/20/08

Bring it on!

I live in Madison, wouldn't live anywhere else, but there are serious problems as this story indicates. Madison needs more genuine businesses and not more porn shops and check-cashing places. And SIDEWALKS!



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