

Chicago Tribune

“Wanted: More yuppies; Waukegan hopes to lure young professionals to aid image, revival”

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If everything goes as planned, a creature rarely seen on the streets of Waukegan will soon migrate to the city's downtown condominiums, restaurants and bars: the yuppie.

But with few of its own, Waukegan will be looking to raid Chicago's stock of free-spending young professionals, particularly those who don't make quite enough to live Chicago's high life.

The town that has eyed a revival for decades is pinning its latest hopes on downtown's first major residential property, a 69-unit condominium building scheduled for groundbreaking later this year on a bluff above Lake Michigan. In a town where the per capita income is \$17,000, the condos are priced from \$219,500 to a very un-Waukegan \$895,000.

Cue the imported yuppies.

"We want young urban professionals, the yuppies who just got a job but can't afford the big- scale stuff," said Ald. Tony Figueroa, whose ward includes the corner of Washington Street and Sheridan Road where the development will be.

"I see people [coming] who have looked at similar condos in Chicago but know those cost three to four times as much."

This week, the City Council even hired a public relations firm to spread the message that if you can't live it up in Chicago, then do it in Waukegan--and with a lake view.

"We want to get the word out that Waukegan is on the move and the place to move to," Mayor Richard Hyde said. "The myth of saying, 'Hey, you're gonna get mugged if you go to Waukegan,' that might have been 15 or 20 years ago, but it's not now."

Waukegan was a prototypical middle-class town best known for spawning Jack Benny and Ray Bradbury until its factory jobs and economy dried up in the 1970s. Left in their place were the signs of a faltering city: crime, pollution and a downtown that becomes a ghost town of blinking stoplights by 6 p.m.

Images on the flier hyping the condos lay out a clear vision of a new Waukegan: a stunning setting sun, a woman gazing across the water with a champagne flute at her side, a pair of sailboats on a brilliantly sunny day.

In a seeming nod to the unlikely scene they're setting, it says below the photos, "Elegant living. Stunning lake views. In the heart of Waukegan."

Libertyville developer John Bergeron said that within two weeks of putting the properties on the market, he had sold 14 condominiums but needs to sell another 20 to start construction on 3.34 vacant acres that the city, eager to revive downtown, sold to him for \$1. When 34 of the units are sold, the city will also guarantee \$7.4 million that Bergeron borrowed from a bank to pay for the development.

Bergeron hopes to break ground for the development, called Marquette Place, in June and have the first residents move in by fall 2007.

He makes no apologies for the price of the units, despite what he called the "non-believers" who say enough buyers can't be lured there. Anything is possible, he said, if the condos can project the North Shore's image of affluence. "That's the only way you're going to be able to change the perception of Waukegan," he said. "In a matter of a few years, you're going to see an amazing transformation."

Advocates say the transformation began with the \$23 million restoration of the Genesee Theater in 2004, which has attracted such performers as Jerry Seinfeld and Bill Cosby, and continues not only with the condos but with three downtown restaurants poised to open--which will make a total of five. An ongoing chemical waste cleanup in Waukegan Harbor will only make downtown more livable, proponents say.

Among the skeptics is Skokie developer Chris Rintz of New England Developers, which built a 350-condominium development called HarborPark along the lakefront in Kenosha.

The major difference between the two is price, he said. In Kenosha, about 20 miles north, units cost \$80,000 to \$300,000 and all look onto Lake Michigan.

"Just because you can see the lake doesn't mean you can charge North Shore prices," Rintz said. "I don't think Waukegan is significantly different from Kenosha."

Even people rooting for the success of the development acknowledge it faces challenges, due largely to the negative perception of Waukegan and the fact that it is difficult to persuade people to take chances with their money. "Anytime you take an area that's been depressed, there are always challenges," said Steve Robinson, president of the Lake County Chamber of Commerce. "It's just getting the people to step to the plate and make it reality."

Among them will be Rod Drobinski, a lifelong Waukeganite who fits the city's vision of a downtown resident. He is young (29), professional (an assistant state's attorney in Lake County) and about to be married.

He and his fiance were leaning toward a townhouse in Warren Township before thoughts of a view of Lake Michigan seduced them into paying "north of \$350,000" for a two-bedroom fifth-floor unit with a lake view.

Drobinski said he has seen big ideas for downtown redevelopment floated before that never got far--like a 140-unit condo plan in 2003 that fizzled after a deal couldn't be reached with the Waukegan Port District, which owned the land.

With the restaurants and the money spent on the Genesee, Drobinski is optimistic. But there needs to be more, he said, to attract people like himself who don't have Waukegan roots: more restaurants, entertainment and upscale bars.

"They're doing the right thing so far," he said. "There just needs to be more things to do downtown.

"I think it's going to work out this time. Obviously--I'm moving in."