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Taller skyline in store for city?

Changes at airport could lead to developers building higher

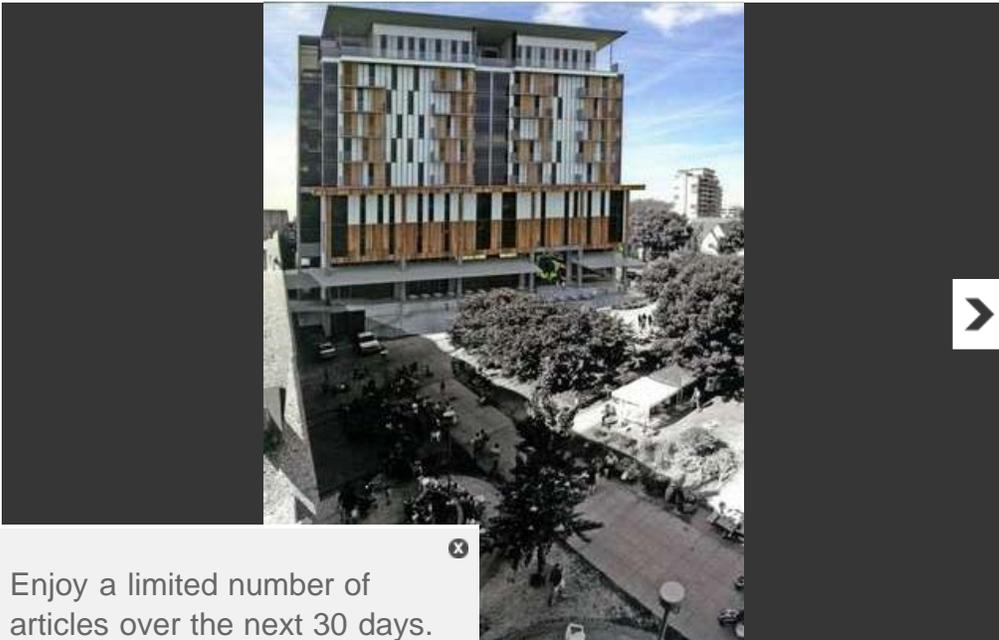
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Written by
Josh O'Leary
Iowa City Press-Citizen

When Plaza Towers opened and became Iowa City's tallest building, its 14 stories scraped the ceiling for the maximum allowable height under federal airspace restrictions.

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But future downtown towers have a chance of sprouting beyond that invisible barrier, city planners say, thanks to changes at the Iowa City Airport that have steered aircraft away from the heart of the city.

The city earlier this month unveiled nine proposals received from developers for prime downtown property at the corner of College and Gilbert streets, including three pitches for buildings between 15 and 20 stories — projects that would not have not been possible

Courtesy of City of Iowa City

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under existing Federal Aviation Administration regulations for Iowa City.



The Iowa City skyline is seen on Thursday, Oct. 18, 2012. David Scrivner / Iowa City Press-Citizen / David Scrivner / Iowa City Press-Citizen

“We definitely want to encourage that type of development,” Iowa City Planning and Community Development Director Jeff Davidson said. “We’ve got to be really, really careful about the character of downtown, but we think there can be a successful mix.”

Iowa City’s airport overlay zone currently caps building height at 150 feet above the airport’s elevation within a five-mile radius, equating to about a 14-story maximum height for downtown buildings.

Plaza Towers, for instance, came within inches of that ceiling when it opened in 2006 on South Linn Street, Davidson said. Another project by developer Marc Moen, a \$10.7-million mixed-use tower in the early stages of construction in the pedestrian mall, also will reach 14 stories once complete.

Further adding to Iowa City’s future skyline, North Liberty-based Kinseth Hospitality Co. announced last month its plans to construct a 12-story hotel near the corner of Burlington and Clinton streets.

The scale of future development in Iowa City potentially could be raised, however.

About five years ago, the Iowa City Airport decommissioned its north-south runway and reconfigured incoming and outgoing air traffic to its other strips. The idea was to keep flight paths away from the helipad at University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics, and it rerouted planes that previously had to make a banking maneuver over downtown to the south and southwest of the airport.

“You hardly ever see planes over downtown anymore,” Davidson said.

That change in flight paths opens the door for builders to now seek exemptions from the FAA for downtown buildings exceeding that 150-foot height. Across the river, in fact, UIHC already has been granted such an exemption from the FAA for its planned children’s hospital addition. The \$284 million UIHC tower, which will have 11 above-ground floors, will exceed the current FAA height ceiling by more than 50 feet, according to an airspace study, making it the city’s tallest structure relative to sea level once built.



James Ferentz

Oct. 20, 2012



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Airport operations specialist Michael Tharp said with UI receiving FAA clearance to build the children's hospital tower, downtown builders may have a good chance of doing the same.

"My feeling would be that there would be some room to exceed the blanket height that's out there," Tharp said.

The city put out a call for proposals for a collection of properties it owns at the corner of College and Gilbert streets earlier this year, and this month released details of nine developers' submissions, all of which are for buildings five stories or higher. The tallest three proposals call for buildings of 20, 18 and 15 stories.

"Some of them have at least nosed around and asked the FAA, and I think have gotten some indication they might get some relaxation of that (height)," Davidson said of the developers.

Transportation planner John Yapp, who is serving as the contact person for developers for the Gilbert and College streets project, said builders may have to work with the FAA to tailor the exterior features of a building that exceed the height requirements.

"The FAA may allow some penetration into that ceiling with lighting and coloring at the top of the building to ensure the building is not a hazard for aircraft," Yapp said.

When opponents of Moen's latest tower organized earlier this year, their chief objection was with the \$2.8 million tax-increment financing package the city has pledged to spur the project. But some residents also voiced concern that the scope of the project was too large for the site and that it would block the sun from the pedestrian mall.

Carol deProse, a former Iowa City Council member who led a petition drive against the use of TIF for Moen's project, said it's too early to say whether residents will object to the scale of the College and Gilbert streets proposals. But she said that she would continue to oppose the use of public funds for such projects — something city leaders have said will be decided later during the financial evaluation process.

"A significant number of people are fed up with TIF financing, so we just have to take it as it comes," deProse said.

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