

# Seeking the city life



**Exposed steel beams add to the contemporary feel in the downtown Ocala condo owned by Holland and Barbara Drake.** [DOUG ENGLE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER]

## Study indicates downtown Ocala is ripe for the residential market

**By Fred Hiers**  
Staff writer

Holland Drake lives only a few dozen feet from the window where he and his mother used to pay the family's telephone bill in the old Sprint Building.

The window and payment box are still there. The building is now 302 Broadway, an upscale, 18-unit condominium building that opened for condo sales earlier this year. He and his wife bought one of the homes before Drake and his construction company completed the project for its owner.

His new home is only a few blocks from Drake Construction Services and his work on Fort King Street. He could walk to work but drives just in case he needs the car. He is one of the handful of Ocala residents who live downtown — the first trickle in what city



**Holland Drake and his wife, Barbara, bought one of the contemporary condos in downtown Ocala, where they now live on the fourth floor in 302 Broadway.** [DOUG ENGLE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER]

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A recent city-sponsored study says the downtown area could easily accommodate

800-1,000 residential units a year for the next five years and there are enough people to want to live in them.

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▲ HIDE CAPTION

Holland Drake poses outside his downtown Ocala condo. [Doug Engle/Staff photographer]



By Fred Hiers

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## CITY

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The Ocala City Council is redeveloping downtown to attract people like Drake: empty-nesters, young professionals and young families. The city markets its walkability to restaurants, shops, the historic movie theater and arts district. It has invested millions of dollars for the construction of a downtown parking lot, highend hotel, theater renovations and art spaces.

Drake bought in. The recent study says others will, too, changing downtown Ocala from a predominately nightlife destination to a mixed use gathering place.

"I've always lived downtown. My house was on Fifth Street when I was growing up," Drake said. "Now we're empty-nesters and I absolutely didn't want to be tied to a yard."

"The same with a car. The less I need it, the more I enjoy the day," he said. "It's cool to step out your door and walk to places."

Laurie Volk, of New Jersey- based Zimmerman/Volk Associates, is the consultant who wrote "An Analysis of Residential Market Potential" for Ocala's downtown. Part of the analysis was to determine what kind of people want to live downtown and what they want for housing.

Here are highlights of the analysis: Volk estimates that over a five-year period, there are 1,140 households each year that would live in Ocala's downtown if the housing units were available. The study estimated those households would be made up of younger singles, couples, emptynesters, retirees and families. About 65 percent would prefer to rent rather than own.

Volk said that local market demand for downtown living reflects a national trend.

"The significant transformation of American households, particularly shrinking household size and the predominance of one- and two-person households, over the past decade, combined with steadily increasing traffic congestion and fluctuating gasoline prices, has resulted in important changes in neighborhood and housing preferences, with major

shifts from predominantly single-family detached houses in lower-density suburbs to higher-density apartments, townhouses and detached houses in urban and mixed-use neighborhoods," Volk wrote in her analysis.

"This fundamental transformation of American households is likely to continue for at least the next decade," she wrote. "This transformation has been driven by the convergence of the preferences of the two largest generations in the history of America: the Baby Boomers, currently estimated at 73.8 million, born between 1946 and 1964, and the estimated 88.7 million millennials, who were born from 1977 to 1996..." "The convergence of two generations of this size — simultaneously reaching a point when urban housing matches their life stage — is unprecedented," she said.

And those groups are having an impact on how households look, she wrote.

"In contrast to the traditional family (married couples with children) that comprised the typical post-war American household, Boomers and millennials are households of predominantly singles and couples," she said.

To accommodate what Ocala's downtown residents will want, Volk recommends the city encourage a mixture of rental units, multi-family, for-sale lofts/apartments and single-family attached, for sale townhouses and condominiums.

She recommended that rental units make up that majority of the housing mix.

"Another significant shift is the millennials' strong propensity for renting rather than owning," she wrote. "This is due in part because of their relative youth — many do not have sufficient funds for a down payment and many others are burdened by student debt — and in part because the collapse of the housing market made many of them skeptical about the value of owning versus renting."

The downtown market is bordered to the north by Northeast Third Street, Pine Avenue to the west, Southeast Watula Avenue to the east and Southwest 10th Street and Southeast Eighth Street to the south.

Younger singles and couples make up about 50 percent of the likely Ocala downtown market, Volk said in her analysis. That is because younger people are more mobile than older people, have a stronger preference

for urban apartments (particularly lofts) and are willing to leave their current homes to live downtown.

And Ocala's downtown offers what many downtown dwellers would want.

"The downtown square is really the heart of your city, and it's very impressive the way the buildings surround it and it does really attract people in a way you might not realize," Volk said.

"The next largest general market segment, at 33 percent of the annual potential market for new, higher-density units ... is comprised of older households (empty-nesters and retirees)," Volk's analysis concluded.

"Most of these households have adult children who no longer live in the family home; many are enthusiastic participants in community life and most are still actively involved in well-paying careers in the banking, legal and financial professions," she said.

More than 80 percent of the empty-nesters and retirees who would move into Ocala's downtown would be coming from other parts of Ocala or Marion County.

Factors that contribute to the desirability of living in the downtown Ocala area include:

- Its mixed use of restaurants, offices and retailers

- Its proximity to Tusawilla Park, which includes a lake, sports fields, playgrounds, Reilly Arts Center, the Discovery Center and Ocala Union Station, which is home the Magnolia Art Xchange
- Its proximity to two residential historic areas.
- Its proximity to Ocala Regional Medical Center and Munroe Regional Medical Center.
- Its proximity to Ocala City Hall and city offices.
- Plans for a new hotel and affiliated retail and residential spaces.

The Boyd Group has announced plans to build a multi-story residential and retail complex south of the downtown square.

But as much as the downtown offers, Councilman Jay Musleh asked Volk during a recent public, downtown development workshop if whether not having a downtown grocery store would be a problem in developing the area for residential and more retail use.

"The fact that you don't have one doesn't surprise me in the least," Volk replied. "Very few grocery stores exist in downtowns."

Ocala's downtown does have a weekly farmer's market, which is helpful, she said. And once enough people live downtown, a developer might build a small grocery store, she said.

Becky McQuade, owner of Hello Gorgeous salon downtown, rents an apartment next door, which she chose earlier this year because of its convenience.

"I work so much anyway and it's nice to just walk upstairs (after work)," she said.

She is confident as more housing units become available in the downtown area and people move in, more people will follow.

And she doesn't think that more people living downtown will change the character.

"We want it busy for sure," she said, explaining that shops and businesses will stay open longer as more people live downtown.

Ocala City Manager John Zobler said Volk's analysis was meant to reassure the City Council of downtown's residential potential. "The purpose was to remove any uncertainty for the downtown market to the extent that we could," Zobler said during a recent downtown workshop. "We came out of a Great Recession. We have a very small market of rental units downtown (now). Very small — seven to 10 units."

Volk said the downtown residential community will grow when it is allowed to.

"What happens is the downtown market will build upon itself," Volk said. "Not every apartment is for every household. If you have a lot of different buildings with a lot of different kinds of apartments, people have a lot more choice, which broadens your market, which means it will continue to build on itself."

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