Same place, different face

By Becky Beaupre, Suburban Reporter

Evanston is undergoing one of the most dramatic transformations in its history with more than half a billion dollars in development that could reshape life in parts of the once-quiet north suburb.

Signs of change are everywhere, from the rumble of renovation under way at the former Chandler's building downtown to the new luxury dormitory almost complete at Northwestern University.

The buzz around town–almost as loud as the roar of construction equipment in some circles–has sparked debate: What does this mean for Evanston's future? How to survive the crowding, dust and din of the activity?

"I think people are waiting in anticipation," said Dick Stillerman, an attorney who has lived in Evanston since the 1960s. "It's a rejuvenation of a downtown that has been languishing."

The town traditionally ridiculed among Northwestern students for its lack of night life may soon have a 16- to 18-screen movie theater, new restaurants and a third major hotel downtown near Church Street.

Some of the suburb's most recognizable downtown fixtures–an Osco drugstore and the old Sherman Avenue garage–could give way to a Sears, Roebuck & Co. department store and a senior-housing tower stretching 20 stories into the skyline.

And if all goes as planned, Evanston's sidewalks and streets will swell with traffic–day and evening–and the city will take on a faster-paced, more urban feel.

"It's a major evolution of Evanston as a business center and Evanston as a community," said Ron Kysiak, executive director of Evanston Inventure, a nonprofit economic development corporation. "I think that Evanston, to many people, was always . . . sort of a laid-back, introspective place. I think we're going to be more a bustling center . . . sort of a Lincoln Park without the price tag."

The projects span just about every category imaginable: A $23 million public library, a $12 million train station, new brick sidewalks, street lights and traffic signals–all of which are completed. Condominiums and apartments have sprouted throughout downtown; office buildings and shopping
plazas have been rehabilitated, and Northwestern, the city's largest employer, has launched a $150 million building blitz.

Evanston Northwestern Healthcare is undergoing a $50 million renovation. A group that includes city, business and university officials is considering an ambitious plan to hard-wire the entire suburb for high-speed Internet access, a project that could attract high-tech business and make Evanston residents some of the most wired in the country.

But the unprecedented boom has its drawbacks–and not everyone is ready.

The Internet project, called Technopolis Evanston, threatens to create a divided community of "haves" and "have-nots" if developers don't find a way to make the new services available to people who can't afford computers.

Parking, already an issue in downtown Evanston, will inevitably become a larger problem even with a net increase of at least 1,000 spaces. The small shops that have opened in the 13 years since Marshall Field's left town could wilt in the shadow of Sears and the "mini-major" retailers proposed for downtown.

"The days of the mom-and-pops in Evanston are just about over," said Tom Fischl, owner of Evanston sporting goods retailer Offischl Sports. "Once this development is built, I guarantee they will be over."

The so-called renaissance also carries a risk: What if the national economy falters before the transformation is complete? The nearly $100 million Church Street Plaza venture, which relies partly on public funds, is barely under way. The $100 million Sears project hasn't been approved.

And what if demand for these developments doesn't prove to be as strong as anticipated? Detractors doubt that many people outside the city's captive audience of college students and residents regularly will choose hard-to-reach Evanston over Old Orchard for shopping and movies.

"They're taking a huge risk in a marketplace I'm not sure they understand," said Troy Thiel, a real estate agent who lives in Evanston. "The plans are too big."

But to others, the activity is simply a sign that Evanston is coming into its own and taking advantage of the strong economy to build on its strengths: proximity to Chicago, position on the lakefront and an intellectual and technological base provided by the university.

"Evanston is finally coming to terms with what it is," said Alan Cubbage, Northwestern's vice president for university relations and the incoming president of the Evanston Convention and Visitor's Bureau. "For years, it thought of itself as the beginning of the North Shore. But now, people would say the North Shore begins at [Wilmette]."

Added Kysiak: "I think people are beginning to understand more of the reality of Evanston is that it is much more like Chicago than Wilmette."
Evanston has always flirted with its urban identity—once before as a shopping mecca from the 1920s until the mid-1950s and later as a headquarters city in the 1970s.

But in recent years, Evanston's downtown has lost its luster. Big gaps in retail offerings have sent residents scurrying to other towns in search of necessities.

"A lot of people are tired of driving all over creation to find a pair of socks," City Manager Roger Crum said.

Of course, if it all comes together, Evanston's revitalization is likely to pump millions into city coffers and lead to hundreds of new jobs.

Supporters also point out that even once the downtown streets crowd and the reference points change, the character of Evanston and its residential neighborhoods is likely to remain the same.

"I'm not sure it's going to change the basic essence," Crum said. "But it may change some perceptions."