

## Student voices chime in on Columbia's future

BY JENNIFER SURFACE

Imagine a new downtown Columbia with more trees and museums, no age-restricted housing, a performing arts theater, metro stop, late-night diner, a larger Lake Kittamaqundi — and, oh yeah, a casino.

Fifty Wilde Lake High School students offered those ideas and others to Columbia planners last week, as the students sought ways to improve a town they described as “wealthy,” “diverse,” “boring,” “conformist,” “perfect” and “sheltered.”

Urban design professor Ann Forsyth solicited students' ideas Nov. 16 as part of her visit to Columbia to speak at “Voices of Vision,” a series of public forums centered on urban planning that is sponsored by General Growth Properties Inc., which owns much

of downtown Columbia, and Howard Community College.

Forsyth is the director of the Metropolitan Design Center at the University of Minnesota. Her visit came as county planners and Howard County residents are attempting to create a 30-year master plan to guide downtown Columbia's redevelopment.

Her appearance at Wilde Lake gave students a chance to paint their visions of the ideal future downtown.

“Maybe it's because of your age, but people forget to ask you,” she told them. “Hopefully, we can make (Columbia) a better place.”

### Students offer their inputs

General Growth officials accompanied Forsyth to Wilde Lake, where they listened as the students debated whether Town Center has a neighborhood feel and which

amenities might improve it.

The Chicago-based developer owns such key Town Center properties as the Columbia mall, Lake Kittamaqundi and Merriweather Post Pavilion. General Growth officials collected maps of Town Center that students created during Forsyth's presentation.

Senior Kevin Duff, 17, said he appreciated being asked his opinion on the matter. He added, however, that Columbia is boring after 9 p.m. and could use more entertainment venues.

Students suggested building a performing arts theater, a late-night diner and museums downtown. Those who complained that Columbia is too boring and sheltered also suggested adding a metro stop so that residents could have easier access to surrounding cities.

Officials and students alike snickered at one student's proclamation that Columbia could use a casino.

Other students asked for

more natural areas, including an expanded Lake Kittamaqundi. One student raised her hand and commented, “They seem to be knocking all the trees down.”

And one student wondered aloud why Columbia must be altered at all.

“Why are we changing Columbia?” she said. “I love it the way it is.”

### Teens are ‘missing voice’

Most of the students who participated in Forsyth's lecture are members of Herb West's sociology class. West said his students examine ways to “decimate social problems” and that he often relates his lessons to Columbia and surrounding cities.

“You have to provoke them to get more involved,” he said. “Once they begin to see themselves as a part of this — once they begin to see it will affect them — they start acting differently.”

Although she also bemoaned a lack of teen nightlife in Colum-

bia, Jessica Goldstein, 17, said she developed a new sense of respect for Columbia's planners through her sociology class.

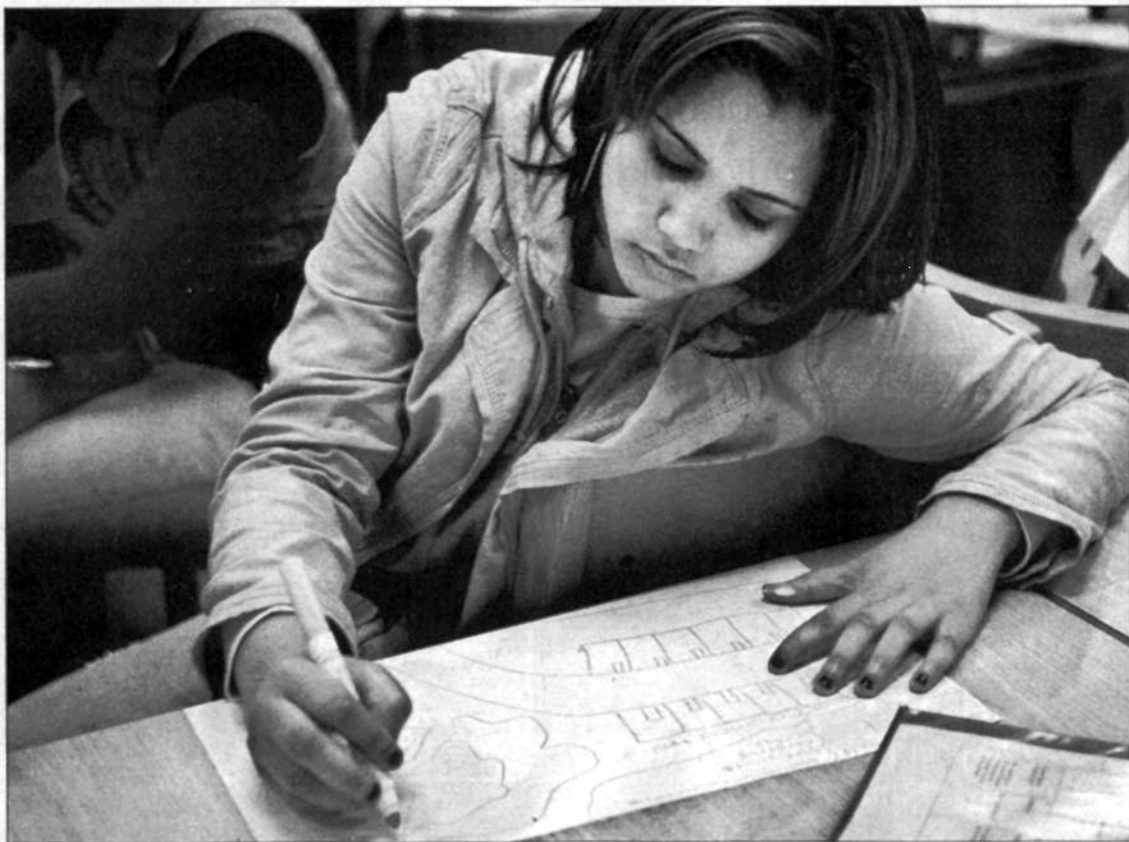
“I didn't realize how much thought went into building this community,” she said. “There are people whose whole job is to sit around and think about Columbia.”

Mary Kay Sigaty, an incoming County Council member who will represent Wilde Lake and Town Center, said that teenagers are the “missing voice” in the ongoing process of drafting the master plan.

“They're stakeholders right now,” she said. “We'll always have this segment of the population and hopefully we can make it so that the next generation of teenagers won't be complaining, ‘There's nothing to do in Columbia.’”

For more information about the “Voices of Vision” series, visit [www.columbiatowncenter.info](http://www.columbiatowncenter.info) or call 877-311-2944.

E-mail Jennifer Surface at [jsurface@patuxent.com](mailto:jsurface@patuxent.com).



STAFF PHOTO BY NICOLE MARTYN

Wilde Lake High School sociology student Sharelle Butler sketches her vision of a future downtown Columbia in a Nov. 16 session at the school with planner Ann Forsyth.