

Main Street Partnering

A Key To Successful Downtown Revitalization

By Kent Robertson*

Healthy downtowns require strong partnerships between significant downtown stakeholders. This article profiles how partnerships can be forged and the pivotal role they play in successful downtown revitalization efforts. A series of principles that underscore effective and sustainable downtown partnerships are presented that should be instructive to a community's downtown development efforts.

Organizations devoted to the revitalization of the downtown district come in many forms, including downtown development authorities, downtown associations, merchant groups, Main Street organizations (affiliated with the National Main Street Center) and chambers of commerce. While these organizations may have different missions, territories, membership and/or funding mechanisms, they all share the reality that tackling downtown issues on their own is, at best, a very steep hill to climb.

Establishing and maintaining enduring relationships with other organizations – both private and public – is important for several fundamental reasons. First, partnerships help to broaden the base of support for the downtown. Sometimes a downtown organization's agenda can appear as narrow and self-serving. Broadening the support base can help reduce this perception and strengthen the chances of securing grants, favorable political decisions and general support in the community for downtown projects. Second, partnerships can create more stakeholders in the community who care about what happens in the downtown. The more people with a stake in downtown, the stronger the downtown. Third, the amount of resources, both human and financial, that become available for downtown activities can witness substantial increases. Fourth, it promotes efficiency by avoiding duplication of efforts by different organizations. Finally, partnerships yield a greater number of people – both professionals and volunteers – to work on downtown events and projects; given how understaffed many downtown organizations are, this becomes especially significant.

Based on two case studies (Danville, Kentucky and St. Charles, Illinois as described in the full article) plus numerous other communities that the author has worked with in recent years, a number of principles emerge that underscore successful downtown partnerships.

Establish Strong Interconnections with City Hall

Having the city government committed to a healthy downtown is an invaluable asset for a downtown organization, as well as the overall community, to possess. The establishment of a reliable funding source is one obvious benefit. In a national survey of Main Street programs conducted by the author, 33 of the 39 programs received annual funding from the city, accounting for an average of 33 percent of their total budget. But a formidable partnership goes much deeper than funding. It is essential to build and continuously nurture strong lines of communication with the multitude of players who comprise city government – city administrator, mayor, members of city council and key city department heads (i.e., planning, economic development, engineering). Because the players change frequently due to elections and job turnover, the communication must be an ongoing effort. Having the city on board helps in convincing others in the community of the value and merit of specific downtown projects.

Broaden the Support Base for Downtown

One method for accomplishing this goal is to establish effective alliances with other community organizations that



share some of the goals with the downtown revitalization organization. For example, a convention and visitors bureau and an economic development authority, while differing somewhat in their missions and focus from a Main Street program, all derive benefits from a healthy downtown. So working collectively on appropriate projects produces benefits for each organization, not to mention the community as a whole. The same is true for a chamber of commerce, although this can be challenging in some cities because the chamber may be seen as a competitor for members. The two organizations can coexist nicely, however, as is found in some small towns (i.e., Osceola, Wisconsin – pop. 2,500) where, out of economic necessity, the main street manager is also the director of the Chamber of Commerce. By emphasizing cooperation rather than competition, as was achieved in both Danville and St. Charles, downtown organizations can work together effectively with chambers and other organizations, thereby increasing the number of organizational stakeholders in the downtown.

Formalize Working Relationships

Informal coalitions are extremely valuable to a downtown organization, but these associations with other organizations are given more permanence and standing if they are formally authorized as part of the organizational structure. This also ensures the continuance of the partnership arrangement when personnel changes occur within any of the organizations involved. The St. Charles Downtown Partnership supplies a textbook example of this. Its bylaws mandate that it include representatives from the city and several other key community organizations on their board of directors.

Physical Proximity Can Enhance Partnerships

While not essential or always practical, experience has shown that organizations that have their offices near other organizations enable more visibility and communication. Just like people living in a neighborhood are likely to see and interact with their next-door neighbor more so than with someone living on the other side of town, organizational neighbors can more easily see and get to know each other, thereby facilitating more frequent professional encounters.

In Tupelo, Mississippi (pop. 37,000), the Downtown Tupelo Main Street Association was housed in City Hall from 1991-1999, which contributed to a long-term strong partnership with the city that endures today even though it now has new office space elsewhere. And the situation in Danville wherein the Heart of Danville shares a large restored downtown mansion with four other

organizations has proven extremely beneficial for both financial and partnering reasons. One specific example is when a prospective business is visiting the Boyle County Community Development Council that may be interested in a downtown location, the CDC director merely has to walk the business owner down the hall to meet directly with the Heart of Danville.


Partner With Key Downtown Institutions

Many institutions call downtown home, such as the post office, library, museums and other tourist attractions, hospitals, schools, churches and universities. These institutions constitute key destinations that are anchors for the downtown. Moreover, they are very important to the community, widely valued and often have influential members of the community on their boards of directors. And, since downtown is their neighborhood, these institutions are directly affected on a daily basis by the downtown's health and prosperity. Therefore, getting them involved in the downtown organization provides mutual benefits. In St. Charles, for example, a librarian from the St. Charles Public Library chairs the DSCP's Organization Committee, while, as mentioned earlier, the Heart of Danville has forged strong working relationships with Centre College and Constitution Square State Historic Site.

Conclusion

The downtown is important to the entire community for reasons related to tax base, community heritage, tourism, past public and private investments, a central gathering place and a strong sense of place/community. Therefore, the job of planning, developing, and promoting the downtown should involve a wide array of organizations, institutions and individuals that extend far beyond the downtown revitalization organization. Partnerships that can be sustained over time are the key for ensuring this happens.

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