

# LET'S TALK BUSINESS

Ideas for Expanding Retail and Services in Your Community

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## Enhancing Downtown's Sense of Place: A Key to Sustaining a Healthy Community

Drawn from a presentation by Kent Robertson\*

What makes some downtowns more appealing than others? Many argue that it is a "sense of place." While difficult to define, a sense of place is what draws people to a successful downtown. It impacts economics: more people downtown results in improved business activity, increased property values and an expanded local tax base. Enhancing downtown's sense of place should be considered in a community's "smart growth" comprehensive plan so that future generations can enjoy the benefits of a more sustainable and pedestrian-friendly community.

This article summarizes comments by Kent Robertson, presented at the 14<sup>th</sup> Conference on the Small City and Regional Community. His presentation focused on eight elements that create a sense of place in small city downtowns.

### Distinctive from other commercial settings

Downtowns are distinctively different from cookie-cutter regional malls, strip shopping centers or big box stores. Robertson argues downtown's distinctive environment contributes to a sense of place. He believes that community leaders should recognize and build on this uniqueness. A strong, distinctive identity can be accented through banners, welcome signs, or construction or renovation of a landmark such as a clock tower. Many downtowns also have a riverfront that can make it more distinctive from the business areas on the edge of town.

### Evolved over time

It is difficult to create a sense of place from scratch. A sense of place represents various periods of a community and builds on its heritage. In fact, many suburban communities are now trying to create their own unique identity through the construction of new town centers and other "place-making efforts." Downtowns have a head start as they already have buildings of many ages and have evolved over time.

### Multifunctional

Mixed uses contribute to a sense of place. Unlike shopping centers where the focus is on retail, a downtown might serve multiple purposes in one compact, walkable place. Downtowns can provide office, retail, dining, services, government, entertainment and cultural activities. Residential housing is on the rise in downtowns, contributing to a sense of place and adding life to a business district that might otherwise shut down at 5PM.

### Pedestrian-Friendly

A sense of place is best experienced on foot, not in a car. People will walk if sidewalks are safe, comfortable, and enjoyable; and if destinations are clearly linked by a network of sidewalks and pathways.



Photo courtesy of Alice Justice

● Amenities that make a pedestrian-friendly environment can include a downtown directory, benches for sitting, brick pavement, lighting, planters and street trees. Even alleys can be retrofitted with sidewalk cafes to be pedestrian friendly. Streets should not be too wide and sidewalks should be in good condition and not too narrow. Large surface parking lots right on Main Street should be discouraged as people walk by them as quickly as possible.

### **Represent Community's Unique Heritage**

Artificial or external themes detract from downtown's authenticity and heritage. Uncovering the original architecture of buildings allows people to connect with their community's past. Owners often take pride in their building's attractive facade once they are uncovered from their aluminum slipcovers. School history activities and self-guided historic walking tours are two ways in which a downtown can celebrate its heritage.

### **Human Activity**

Without people, the built environment cannot by itself provide a sense of place. A downtown square or a park with a band shell often serve to draw people because of the sense of place they create. Entertainment, community festivals and farmers markets are sample activities that generate human activity. While people may not have time to do business downtown during such an event, they are much more likely to come back when they have the time. The more people present, the greater the opportunity for social contact and interaction, resulting in a greater sense of community.

### **Encourage People to Linger**

One of the big challenges retailers and shopping center managers face is how to extend customer shopping time. Interesting and attractive downtowns encourage people to stay longer especially if numerous sitting places and entertainment are offered. However, the downtown must be comfortable, safe, exciting interesting and aesthetically pleasing.

### **Community Ownership**

A sense of place is enhanced when local people take pride in downtown and care for it. Community ownership can range from maintaining flower boxes to finding new uses for large, underutilized "white elephant buildings." Opportunities to work together through public and private partnerships should be made available to the entire community. "Main Street" and business improvement district programs can help make this cooperation happen.

Communities developing a comprehensive plan should consider the role of its downtown and the sense of place it offers the broader community. The eight elements de-

scribed here can help a community maintain and enhance a more sustainable and pedestrian-friendly environment for generations to come.

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#### **\*Source:**

Drawn from presentation by Kent Robertson, Ph.D. of St. Cloud State University (Minnesota) at the 14<sup>th</sup> Conference on the Small City and Regional Community, University of Wisconsin-Extension, Madison, WI, September 29, 2000. Also drawn from: Robertson, Kent (October 1998). *Pedestrian-Friendly Cities*. Minnesota Cities, 7-8. Kent Robertson can be contacted at: Department of Community Studies, St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498. Telephone: 320-255-3184; email: kent@stcloudstate.edu.

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