

Family Amusements as a Catalyst for Downtown Revitalization

By Erika Rence*

The popularity of amusements to draw attention and traffic downtown is growing. Some cities use these amusement facilities as a revitalization tool to attract both residents and tourists with the hope of enlivening downtown. Ideally, the attention drawn to the downtown by these amusement facilities will attract businesses and spawn an economic recovery.

Amusements can range in size from large family dining and entertainment centers to small carousels. The following examples describe the role of amusements in the revitalization of three small city downtowns.

Mansfield, Ohio

Due to the development of a nearby regional mall, the downtown of Mansfield, OH (pop. 50,557) was in a state of decline. It was hoped that the placement of a carousel downtown would attract visitors and generate an economic resurgence in the area.

Richland Carousel Park opened in 1991 with the help of city, private, and corporate contributions. It was constructed as the first new, hand-carved carousel to be built and operated in the United States since the 1930's. A number of retail, restaurant, and office spaces were then developed in this area of downtown, which was renamed the Carousel District. By the end of the decade, this district reached 100 percent occupancy of its finished downtown space.ⁱ

In 1999, 22 new businesses opened downtown, 61 new jobs were created, \$6.2 million was reinvested downtown, and over 70,000 square feet of vacant space was filled. The continuing economic success of the once blighted Carousel District has led the way for the downtown's reemergence as a thriving commercial district and led Mansfield, Ohio to win the 2001 Great American Main Street Award. The carousel now attracts 250,000 riders a year and downtown Mansfield continues to prosper.ⁱⁱ

Fort Smith, Arkansas

Ten years after a tornado ravaged many parts of Fort Smith, Arkansas (pop. 80,270); a revitalization effort has taken place that is attracting visitors to the downtown area. Redevelopment included an expansion to the convention center, a five-acre riverfront development, and a new riverfront park. Included in this revitalization effort was the construction of The Park at West End, an old-fashioned amusement park located on the riverfront.

Opened in May of 2006, the amusement park comprises pieces of Fort Smith's past, including the front entrance gate and many of the individual amusements that have been accumulated by the park's creator over several years. The park features a six-story, 1936 Ferris wheel, a 1950s Pullman railcar restaurant retrofitted to look like an Art Deco diner, a penny arcade with retro arcade games, an English double-decker bus converted into a concession stand, a hand-painted Italian carousel, and a musical circus wagon. This project is intended to be a seasonal family fun area that is expected to bring more business downtown.ⁱⁱⁱ

Developer Phil White said the attraction adds to the life of the downtown, serving as a bridge between daytime activities of shopping, tourism and business to evening dining and club nightlife. "I can see people coming into Fort Smith and seeing this beautiful old Ferris wheel," White explained. "It makes a statement that this downtown isn't dead."^{iv}



Richland Carousel Park in Mansfield, Ohio, opened in 1991 as the first new, hand-carved carousel to be built and operated in the United States since the 1930's. It has contributed to the rebirth of the city's downtown. Source:

<http://www.southofboston.net/specialreports/quincyrehab/pages/2a.shtml>

White hoped to fill the missing family niche within the downtown area and to foster further downtown development and create a positive first impression of his city for those entering from the west.^v

Frankenmuth, Michigan

On a larger scale than the previous examples, downtown Frankenmuth, Michigan (pop. 4,838) is filled with amusements that have drawn the attention of all ages. Facilities ranging from “cosmic bumper cars” to an indoor water park are all within close proximity in this town that touts itself as “Michigan’s Little Bavaria”.

Historically a small farming community turned tourist destination due to the development of interstate highways after WWII, downtown Frankenmuth offers a wide variety of amusements in a small area making it a unique destination for visitors and residents alike. Amusements include a maze of mirrors, bumper cars, a petting zoo, an indoor water park, a hobby center with a paintball park and a remote control car-racing track, a year-round haunted house, along with many other attractions.

Frankenmuth has developed an exciting and attractive atmosphere that attracts visitors and residents year round through its provision of an eclectic selection of amusements that help to create a strong sense of identity and economic vitality in this community.^{vi}

Conclusion

The addition of amusements as a tool to help restore the economic and cultural viability of downtowns is gaining popularity across the country. By developing amusement facilities in downtown areas, the cities profiled have been able to attract visitors and new businesses back downtown. This has stimulated activity in the core of the community through both small and large scale investments.

Amusement facilities can take many forms, from a carousel built as a group project by volunteers to an individual effort by a local developer. As in all of the examples, it was affection for the communities’ downtowns and a sincere desire for revitalization by community members that acted as the catalyst for change.

Sources:

ⁱ Ohio Main Street Program. Success Stories. Retrieved from: www.downtownohio.org/success.htm on July 21, 2006.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ State of Arkansas – Media Room Retrieved from: <http://www.arkansasmediaroom.com/newsreleases/listings/display.asp?id=739> on July 22, 2006.

^{iv} Arkansas Travel.com Online Magazine. Retrieved from: http://www.arkansastravel.com/cover_stories/article.asp?id=588 on July 24 2006.

^v Terry, Sarah K. “All-around amusement: The Park at West End bridges Fort Smith’s past and present.” Northwest Arkansas Times. June 16, 2006. Retrieved from:

<http://nwanews.com/nwat/whatsup/41769/> on July 24, 2006.

^{vi} Frankenmuth Official Visitor Information. Retrieved from <http://www.frankenmuth.org/> on September 27, 2006.

* Erika Rence is a second year master’s of science candidate in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at University of Wisconsin Madison. She also works as a Downtown Revitalization and Survey Research Assistant at the Center for Community and Economic Development at University of Wisconsin-Extension.