



Downtown Economics

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Ideas for Increasing Economic Vitality in Community Business Districts

Green Downtowns: Environmentally-Responsible Practices for Business Districts

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The "greening" of downtown has become increasingly common across North America and Europe. Green downtowns promote environmentally-responsible practices and offer a range of economic advantages. While this trend is partially fueled by an overall growth in "green" consumers (see *Downtown Economics*, November, 2006), it is primarily driven by the fact that a green downtown is a desirable place to live, work, and visit.

Key ingredients of a green downtown include: diverse transportation options and walk-ability, waste reduction and recycling, storm-water capture, the promotion of green-space, energy efficiency upgrades and green building. While each of these elements is beneficial singularly, as a package they provide still greater opportunities for marketing and cost-sharing.

Benefits of a green downtown include dramatic cost savings in energy expendituresⁱ; greater return on investments in the form of higher rent, lease, and sales ratesⁱⁱ; and improved resident and employee health.ⁱⁱⁱ Perhaps most importantly, green downtowns can draw an increase of visitors and "creative class" residents.*

Business Improvement Districts, downtown associations, city governments, and residents, together, can provide the momentum necessary to promote a green downtown. Through collective action, many communities have made this commitment a priority in all of their decision-making and daily actions and others have actually signed this commitment into a local ordinance.^{iv}

There is no specific formula to make a downtown green: indeed, this effort is largely based upon the unique attributes and passionate creativity of each

community. Below are some specific initiatives, ranging from simple to more involved, that can assist your community advance its own greening of downtown.

1) Increase Transportation Options & Walk-ability: Walk-able downtowns include well-planned pedestrian walking-paths, bike routes, and access to downtown businesses by foot. By providing easy access to local shops and services, downtown can promote the convenience that many seek when deciding to shop and live in an urban setting. By combining walk-ability with alternative transportation, people can leave their cars at home or at a hub and not worry about parking.

Suggestion #1: Be certain the cross-walks are very clearly marked with distinct design cues to make drivers more aware of pedestrians. Consider the inclusion of some traffic-calming devises (speed humps or traffic islands).

Suggestion #2: Build bike lanes, and provide plentiful bike parking throughout the downtown.

Suggestion #3: Provide alternative modes of transportation, fitted with bike racks, such as an expanded/updated local bus service for smaller communities, and the installation of a light rail or trolley system for larger cities.



Photo Source: www.pedbikeimages.org/ Dan Burden

* The "creative class" coined by Richard Florida refers to the burgeoning class of well-educated, young urbanites who are increasingly important drivers of the economy.

2) Reduce waste:

Most people are savvy at reducing waste at home using the three R's: reduce, reuse, and recycle. However, at work there is little follow-through. In addition to saving resources and energy, reducing waste saves businesses money on office supplies and energy.

Suggestion #1: Provide recycling containers in the office and for customers. Mandate double-sided printing.

Suggestion #2: Institute a green purchasing policy, which would include purchasing efficient electronics and appliances. For more information, visit <http://www.epa.gov/epp/>.

Suggestion #3: Follow the lead of communities such as Boulder, CO, and adopt a "Zero Waste" resolution. Visit <http://www.ecocycle.org/ZeroWaste/> for more information.

3) Increase Vegetation and Reduce Storm-water Runoff:

In addition to simply making a space more beautiful, increased green-space reduces water run-off, increases filtration to re-supply drinking water, and minimizes the "urban heat island effect." Planting native plants saves water and maintenance costs.

Suggestion #1: Plant shade trees along the streets.

Suggestion #2: Construct strategically-placed rain gardens for increased water filtration. For more information on rain gardens visit <http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/water/wm/nps/rg/index.htm>

Suggestion #3: For a highly visible commitment of increased vegetation, install a green roof on a prominent downtown building, such as the City Hall. See <http://www.greenroofs.org/> for more information.

4) Increase Energy Efficiency & Green Building:

Green building is an approach that creates buildings that are environmentally responsible, profitable, and healthy places to live and work. This often results in substantial cost savings and increased profit on renting, leasing, or sales. While green buildings cost the same or only 2% more to build than a conventional building, they can save as much as 30-70% in energy costs per year^v.

Suggestion #1: Replace incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescents or LED light bulbs; change your

air filter every three months, and program your thermostat during hours the building is not in use.

Suggestion #2:

Existing buildings can be retrofitted in order to capture many energy saving gains. This can include steps such as insulating, and installing efficient hot water heaters, mechanicals and other Energy Star-rated appliances.

Suggestion #3: Install

solar hot water heaters in high waste-demand buildings such as condos, restaurants, car washes. For information, technical assistance, and financial incentives, visit www.focusonenergy.com or see your local utility.

Earth-friendly Holiday lighting

When Davis, CA replaced the traditional C-9 lightbulbs that lit their holiday tree with LED lightbulbs, their cost went from \$150-175/season to only \$5/season.

Source: MAINSTREETLIST Digest, Sept 29, 2007

The above four steps are just the beginning of what your community and its businesses can do to become greener. As you begin to establish these steps in your community, you can promote them through creating a network of green businesses and beginning a marketing campaign. Distributing a sticker or sign to show which businesses are green is a good way to increase visibility of your efforts. An excellent example of a successful promotion campaign is the Bay Area green business program: <http://www.greenbiz.ca.gov/ShopGreen.html> Simply by greening their downtown, a community can become a more attractive place to live, work, and visit. This means the residents will be happier, and the economy will be more vibrant. Benefits of a green downtown extend beyond environmental sustainability to assure economic sustainability as well.

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Sources

ⁱ Davis Langdon. The Cost of Green Revisited. 2007

ⁱⁱ Jackson, Betsy. The Greening of Downtown. *Downtown News Brief*. 8(2) Spring/Summer 2006 pp 3-4

ⁱⁱⁱ Ewing, R., & Kreutzer, R. Understanding the Relationship Between Public Health and the Built Environment: A report prepared for the LEED-ND core committee. May, 2006. Available at: <https://www.usgbc.org/ShowFile.aspx?DocumentID=1736>

^{iv} Toward a Sustainable Community: A Toolkit for Local Governments, UW Extension 2007

^v Jackson, Betsy. The Greening of Downtown. *Downtown News Brief*. 8(2) Spring/Summer 2006 pp 3-4

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