



Downtown Economics

Issue 157
September 2009

Ideas for Increasing Vitality in Community Business Districts

Low Cost, High Impact Building Improvements Downtown

by Joe Lawniczak*

In today's tough economic climate, it is easy to look past things that, on the surface, may seem like low-priority items. We tend to draw the purse strings tight for things that are not immediate necessities. For example, many downtown building and business owners defer needed building improvements and maintenance in times like these, until things pick up. But compare that to an automobile: Just because times are tough, we cannot defer an oil change or new brakes until things get better. If we did, we would run the car into the ground and be even worse off than before. And fixing the results of deferred maintenance often costs more than simply keeping things up in the first place.

The maintenance and appearance of a downtown commercial building is important on a number of different levels. Let's begin from the community level: First of all, downtown is the center of any community. Downtown is typically where a community began and grew from, and thus where a majority of its historic buildings are located. These buildings, built soundly of quality materials, now provide opportunities for reuse. Downtown reflects the image of the entire community. No two downtowns are alike, so preserving this traditional core helps to enhance the unique sense of

place that exists and helps to distinguish the downtown from its competition (neighboring cities, big box retail centers, etc.) The appearance of downtown greatly affects the decisions that shoppers, visitors, residents and investors make about the district.

Downtowns are made up of many individual buildings, none of which is an island. Building owners need to begin thinking district-wide and realize that what is good for the entire district is also good for them, even if it does not result in an immediate financial benefit.

Downtown revitalization does not happen overnight. It often takes many small improvements for people to see that things are changing, and only then will others be motivated to make changes themselves. This creates a domino effect. A series of quality building improvements, even if they are low-cost, helps to create an image of a unified commercial district. Often, these changes result in more customers, which means existing businesses may do better while new, complimentary businesses may be easier to attract. The improved spaces and vibrant business climate means a business may be able to afford higher rents, vacant spaces may be filled, and the building owner generates more income. Finally, building improvements – costly or inexpensive – are investments that will help stabilize and often increase property values.

In addition to the importance of the entire district, building owners must think about their own building as



Thyme Worn Treasures in Rice Lake, WI made a dramatic improvement for only \$1600 (\$1000 for paint and carpentry, and \$600 for the sign). It reflects the character of the business, and since the restoration, this upstart business has done so well it has expanded two times and now occupies half the block

well. It is vital that the building (as well as signage) reflect the character and quality of the business(es) located within. Most buildings downtown have undergone changes in the past...many of them inappropriate. Quite often, simply removing these past alterations can make a huge visible difference, at the same time bringing back the original grandeur of the building. And in most cases, that appearance will reflect the image of the current business.

The good news is that these types of changes are not always expensive. Sometimes quality, low-cost improvements can make a huge impact on the business, the building owner, the downtown, and the entire community. But it is important to realize that "inexpensive" does NOT mean "cheap". Quality work still needs to be done, and many aspects of building restoration are best left to professionals with experience in this field. For information on proper techniques for dozens of different aspects of building restorations, refer to the National Park Service's Preservation Briefs. These can be found at <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/TPS/briefs/presbhom.htm>

Admittedly, not all building improvements can be done inexpensively. Sometimes a building has been neglected for so long, or has had so many past inappropriate changes, that it will take a major investment to repair. Luckily that is not always the case. The most desirable situation is when past alterations were added in such a way that they can be removed and the original elements still remain beneath. This is often the case with the removal of "slip covers." The same is true with the removal of panels covering transom windows. By removing these, the original character can easily be brought back.

In some cases, it is possible to phase a project in order to save money for the time being, with the thought that the remainder of the work will be done when finances are available. In other cases, enough of the remaining building elements remain that most of the work will be simple repairs and minor carpentry.

It is important that building owners not just think of today, but plan for the future. And often there are ways to do so without breaking the bank. But it is also important for local municipalities or downtown organizations to provide financial incentives for building improvements. Most local Main Street programs across the state offer low-interest loan pools or matching grant programs to not only encourage restorations, but also to tie restorations to design guidelines, ensuring that they are done properly. These incentives help to offset the added costs of doing a proper restoration rather than a quick fix.



These photos from Chippewa Falls, WI show the impressive detail that was long-concealed by an inappropriate "slipcover".



By removing these panels from a building in Sharon, WI, the original transom windows were exposed once again for very little cost.

* Joe Lawniczak is the Design Specialist with the Wisconsin Department of Commerce, Bureau of Downtown Development (Wisconsin Main Street Program).