

Making Downtown a Place to Live, Work, and Play

Summary of Presentation by Betsy Jackson*

A key strategy in downtown revitalization efforts is the creation of a mixed-use, 24-hour per day/7-day per week (24/7) environment for living, working, shopping and entertainment. Recently, the Wisconsin Governor's Conference on Downtown Revitalization focused on creating such an environment. The conference featured Betsy Jackson, a nationally respected urban development consultant who spoke on the management and leadership needed in communities to make a vibrant 24/7 business district. Ms. Jackson's key points are summarized in this article.

Efforts to revitalize downtown areas have often focused on a single "big fix" to turn things around. These big fixes have included pedestrian malls, festival marketplaces, aquariums and other tourist attractions, ballparks, convention centers and other projects. These efforts have often failed because there are no single solutions for a complex downtown (just as there are no single owners responsible for downtown's fate). Most big fixes don't reflect the character and quality of the community and are often inherently unstable (politics, finance, market and image). Finally, big fix projects may take time to complete and are sometimes no longer viable after completion.

An alternative to the single big fix is to focus on the many opportunities downtown offers as a place to live, work and play. The combination of these uses can create activity 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The 24/7 downtown is not another big fix. Rather, it is a complex and rich opportunity for building the economic health of your downtown.

Elements of a 24/7 Live-Work-Play Environment

For a downtown to become a vibrant mixed use place, it must be *dynamic*, *interdependent* (one sector does not carry the weight of all others), and *manageable*. The community must work together on the following:

- Building a "neighborhood" that includes a mixture of incomes;
- Creating open and recreational spaces, amenities many new residents will expect;
- Providing meaningful employment for all types of people including entry level workers;
- Providing entertainment including food, drink, music;
- Providing access to cultures including dance, art, theatre;
- Creating vibrant shopping opportunities for local residents and visitors.
- Investing in transportation and helping new residents use transit;
- Maintaining quality given that things will wear out more quickly; and
- Creating a safe environment.

Challenges to the 24/7 Live-Work-Play Formula

Developing and sustaining a mixed use downtown is challenging as there are often inherent conflicts among the different users. Some of the challenges are listed below:

Noise/Trash/Parking - Increased use of the downtown area results in the need to reduce the impacts of increased noise, trash, traffic, and parking. Issues like garbage pick-up time and hours for live music must be properly managed.



Source: <http://www.pedbikeimages.org/>, Dan Burden

Behaviors- New residents may have different expectations of and reactions to the behaviors of patrons of local entertainment establishments. One organization, the Responsible Hospitality Institute, is leading an effort to assist communities and businesses in developing safe and vibrant places for people to socialize. Business may need to rethink their operating practices and local laws may need to be more strictly enforced.

Advocacy – It is sometimes challenging to form a balanced leadership group to work on issues facing a 24/7 downtown. Downtown residents should work together as a voting bloc and be included in the leadership of the downtown area. Effective leadership will have to find solutions to homelessness, shortage of playgrounds, inadequate stores offering daily-needs and other issues not typically found in suburbia.

Management – Managing a program for a 24/7 downtown is more challenging as there are more and diverse stakeholders. It requires more business outreach to help businesses co-exist with residents. Real enforcement of laws and operating procedures is necessary to manage the many different behaviors within the district. Finally, effective public relations is necessary to keep the momentum going.

What Downtown Organizations Can Do

Downtown organizations such as Main Street and Business Improvement programs are well positioned to foster vibrant 24/7 activity in their districts. They are skilled in managing a dynamic district and have relationships with businesses and public leaders. Downtown organizations already are responsible for creating/maintaining high-quality social environment and understand the powers and limitations of enforcement. Finally, downtown organizations have well-established marketing and communications systems.

Downtown organizations must have strong outreach efforts in place. They must create relationships with residents as well as the business community (including restaurants and bars). Outreach must also include working one-on-one with entertainment-related businesses. Finally, outreach should parlay credibility with City Hall to reach *further* (public works, police, licensing, etc.)

Downtown organizations should establish specific programs to address the challenges specific to a 24/7 live-work-play environment.

- Work to adjust public works schedules;
- Reform parking, traffic management, enforcement;
- Increase one-on-one business assistance to help them understand and capture the buying power of residents;
- Increase involvement in public space design, development, and management;
- Create programming that meets residents' needs (play areas, daycare, safe routes to schools, etc.); and
- Create public relations strategies to promote 24/7 in *realistic terms*.

Finally, downtown organizations should foster balanced and quality leadership in guiding the downtown into the future. Leadership should provide residents a role in shaping the future of their neighborhood. Leadership should embrace innovation and be responsive to changing demands and opportunities that may develop.

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