

Rural Downtown Development: Guiding Principles for Small Cities

Summary of a article by Kent Robertson

Small city downtowns are often in need of the same revitalization efforts larger urban centers benefit from. The issues surrounding small city development are complicated because of rural downtown's great diversity in population size, location and economic base. This diversity, and the obvious disparity in scale, means that one cannot simply apply urban development techniques to small city projects. To address the lack of small city development guidelines Kent Robertson, professor of Community Development at St. Cloud State University, developed five principles to inform revitalization in rural and small city downtowns. What follows is a summary of these principles.

Principle #1: Develop a Vision and a Plan for Downtown

Often when the enthusiasm of a small town embraces the idea of downtown improvement the "Let's try this; let's try that" approach ensues. While the sentiment is sincere, this strategy lacks focus and direction. Alternatively, a good first step is engaging in a community visioning process. A community visioning process can take many forms, but typically a town would hold multiple meetings with relevant community stakeholders - business owners, property owners, customers and workers. These stakeholders would discuss and debate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats they see relevant to their downtown area. From this analysis would flow an initial set of action steps. These steps could be general wishes like making downtown a pedestrian friendly street. Or, they could be specific desires such as renovating an abandoned railroad depot. While it is not necessary, the town may want to consider hiring a professional facilitator, with no ties to the community, to organize and direct the visioning process.

Principle #2: Identify and Build Upon Local Assets

When stakeholders gather to discuss the downtown's opportunities it is very common for locals to focus on their community's problems and deficiencies.

Although identifying weaknesses is a crucial step in the visioning process, it is even more critical that time is spent focusing on the downtown's possible assets. Unlike larger urban centers that offer a variety of attractions, small towns must identify one or two enduring assets in order to lay a foundation for successful development. While no two rural downtowns are the same, many have claim to historic buildings and sites that have remained intact for decades. Another common asset is a culture of strong locally owned businesses that have been in the town for generations. The stakeholders should also consider open spaces, natural features like lakes and rivers, and their location in respect to urban centers and other tourist attractions.

Principle #3: Build a Strong Public-Private Partnership

Successful downtown development will not occur without involvement from the public and private sector. The public, most likely city government, can support the development process by (1) investing in public improvements such as sidewalks, streetlights and infrastructure; (2) providing incentives for business expansion and façade enhancement (i.e. low interest revolving loan funds); and (3) loosening city and zoning codes to encourage creative reuse of downtown buildings.

A private downtown organization, independent or attached to a chamber of commerce, is the other half of this critical relationship. These organizations can utilize their collective action to attract and organize human and financial resources, market and promote their downtown,



recruit business and stakeholder involvement and be the unified voice for downtown interests. The closer and more clearly defined this relationship between public and private, the better the chances for a strong development plan.

Principle #4: Enhance the Downtown's Sense of Place

A sense of place is critical to any downtown; it is what draws people to a community, makes them feel connected to their built environment and fosters a sense of belonging. Luckily, small rural downtowns have incredible potential to foster a strong sense of place. One advantage is the deep bond among residents. That bond is fostered by a strong sense of community that stems from deep local roots and local heritage. The close knit local community gives small downtowns a distinct personality that contributes to a unique sense of place. Second, because of rural downtown's smaller scale, they are very pedestrian friendly. This is important because place is best experienced on foot. Third, because small downtowns serve multiple functions (place of retail, services, government and housing) they attract a variety of people that visit at different times of day and week. Lastly, rural residents usually exhibit a higher sense of "common ownership" which translates into a greater stake in the success of any development project.

Principle #5: Determine the Downtown Market

A key question to ask early in the development process is, "who do we envision using our downtown?" To answer this question a town can utilize a formal market analysis. To assist in the analysis small towns often are able to partner with nearby universities or extension offices. If partnerships are not available they may consider hiring a professional consultant. The market analysis will help determine how the downtown can better serve each different category of users. The market analysis can identify business categories that may be missing from the current downtown environment and would contribute to the lessening of locals traveling from their community to other urban centers to complete their shopping. Towns should also consider how to attract residents of surrounding communities and rural areas by positioning themselves as a regional center. The town may also be able to positioning themselves as destination place based on their location in respect to major urban areas and other tourist attractions.

Conclusion

Rural downtowns offer a breadth of challenges and opportunities because of their wide range of attributes and assets. These differences all require a unique set of specific development goals and approaches. The guiding principles summarized above can offer each downtown a framework to pursue their own individual downtown goals.

Source

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