

LET'S TALK BUSINESS

Ideas for Expanding Retail and Services in Your Community

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Smart Growth as an Opportunity for Downtowns: *Position of the Wisconsin Downtown Action Council*

by
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The Wisconsin Downtown Action Council is a state-wide membership organization that supports the physical, economic and social revitalization and management of downtown areas throughout Wisconsin. The organization recently released a position paper on smart growth and the opportunity for downtowns to be recognized in local comprehensive planning efforts. Their position on smart growth is presented in this newsletter.

What Downtown Leaders Should Know About Smart Growth

"Smart Growth" has been a response across the country to the issue of sprawl and congestion. At its heart are economic, environmental, and sense-of-place issues. These issues are important to both large urban areas and small cities, and present tremendous opportunities to our traditional downtowns.

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) defines smart growth as growth that is economically sound, environmentally friendly, and supportive of community livability. It is typically characterized by a higher concentration of amenities, a mix of commercial and residential uses, and a pedestrian-orientation. Livable communities are a way of life in which economic dynamism, green spaces, and friendly civic streets all coexist.

With the enactment of smart growth legislation in the 1999 Wisconsin budget, our state has the opportunity to address land use issues in a comprehensive fashion

which interrelates important community attitudes and issues. These plans will require communities to address key topics including the role of their downtown areas. Downtowns are positioned to be a key element in the comprehensive plans of communities throughout the state.

Downtown Revitalization as a Smart Growth Option

Existing downtowns provide a head start for many communities planning for sensible growth. They use land efficiently and already have public infrastructure such as streets and utilities. Downtowns are by nature compact developments and provide many infill opportunities. They are "center focused" with a mixture of uses. Downtowns often have existing transportation options in place including public transit and bicycle access, and are typically pedestrian friendly. Finally, they convey the character of the community and its history, celebrating a community's unique sense of place.

For downtown to be a viable smart-growth option, new development must be economically viable and preserve open space and natural resources. Land use planning must be comprehensive, integrated and regional. Public, private, and nonprofit sectors must col-



Photo by George Sbley

laborate on growth and development issues to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. Redevelopment of infill housing, brownfield sites, and obsolete buildings must be actively pursued. Overall, downtown must again become an integral component of the regional economy.

WDAC Response to Smart Growth

The Wisconsin Downtown Action Council (WDAC) views downtown as a critical component in smart growth comprehensive planning and a viable smart growth option. This organization believes that effective and sensible planning can lead to revitalization of downtown areas.

Accordingly, WDAC will:

- 1 Champion downtown as a key component of smart growth
- 2 Provide a toolbox for local/regional comprehensive planning and help communities develop the component of a quality downtown plan
- 3 Illuminate the benefits of downtown to developers
- 4 Work to identify/remove barriers to downtown development
- 5 Coordinate efforts with other organizations that promote smart growth and recognize its relationship to downtown

WDAC will accomplish these by serving its members, the public, downtown organizations, governmental leaders, planners, consultants and private developers through education, advocacy and alliance. Specific strategies under consideration include:

- Coordination of panel discussions including prominent local leaders instrumental in implementing a downtown revitalization plan. Insight gained from these discussions will be documented and shared statewide.
- Recognize communities that have undertaken downtown planning efforts that follow smart growth principles.
- Develop a web-based listing of financial and technical resources to assist in local comprehensive planning efforts. This listing will direct users to sites that specifically address the ingredients of a quality plan (housing, transportation, adaptive reuse, brownfield redevelopment, etc.).

WDAC is also considering a number of legislative initiatives in support of downtown revitalization. These initiatives are focused on removing barriers to downtown development and encouraging planning efforts that support downtowns and smart growth principles. For more information on WDAC, contact Andrew Janke at 608/365-0150.

Smart Growth – Workshop: New Opportunities for Downtown

The Wisconsin Main Street Program and WDAC are offering an educational program to equip downtown professionals with the skills necessary to elevate downtown as an important component in local comprehensive planning.

Topics will include:

- Smart Growth – What are the New Opportunities for Downtowns?
- Understanding the Wisconsin Comprehensive Planning Legislation
- Model Comprehensive Plans
- Downtown and Smart Growth Panel Discussion

The program is open to Main Street managers and WDAC members (including new members) and will be held Thursday, February 15 from 9AM – 4PM at the Beloit Inn, 500 Pleasant Street, Beloit, Wisconsin. For more information, contact Shari Cox at the Wisconsin Department of Commerce, 608-266-1019.

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