

LET'S TALK BUSINESS

Ideas for Expanding Retail and Services in Your Community

Issue 30
February 1999

Guiding Downtown Development

by
Kent Robertson*

A city's downtown district embodies the heritage of a community. A city's very image is often identified with the look and vitality of its main street. The downtown district usually contains many of the oldest and most significant buildings, and is often where many important community events and celebrations take place. Economically, a strong downtown serves to maintain the city's tax base and protects past public investments. Cities need a center, or gathering place, to function as a community. Cities without centers, which includes a majority of suburbs, have begun to explore possibilities for creating a traditional core area. Cities possessing a traditional center are engaged in the never-ending struggle to maintain and revitalize the core. This article offers nine guiding principles for successful downtown development in small cities of less than 75,000 population.

Develop a vision for downtown. Countless cities make the mistake of forging ahead with redevelopment efforts without a clear sense of community needs, ideas, or visions. Individual projects are usually implemented in a vacuum without the context of a long-term downtown plan. Through extensive discussion, debate, and consensus building, city officials should work closely with downtown interests and the community at-large to create a long-term vision for their downtown. Once in place, the vision helps guide the city in determining the need, importance, location, and design of future revitalization proposals.

Balance public and private commitment. Successful downtown development is best achieved when it combines a city government dedicated to downtown improvements with a active downtown association. The city can demonstrate its commitment by investing in public improvements such as sidewalks, streetlights, and infrastructure and by providing incentives

for business expansion and building facade improvements (i.e., a low interest revolving loan fund). The downtown association can address those areas best left to the private sector, such as marketing, promotions, and recruitment, and serve as a unified voice for the needs of downtown business interests.

Be patient. Revitalization is a gradual process that does not happen overnight. It usually encompasses a series of small improvements over an extended period of time, each of which may generate a great deal of hoopla. For example, improvements like one or two building owners improving their facades, hanging flower baskets along main street, or the creation of a directory of downtown businesses will probably not merit front page newspaper coverage. In fact, the revitalization process may be so gradual that it goes unnoticed by many citizens. However, after a number of years, the city should have a more viable and attractive downtown. Large development projects are seldom the panacea their advocates make them out to be, especially in smaller cities.

Do not suburbanize the downtown. Downtowns that try to compete with the suburbs by erecting large, modern, suburban-style structures (i.e., large setbacks, surface parking lots in front, blank walls) are rarely successful and usually damage the traditional downtown fabric. The focus should be on solutions



Photo courtesy of Wisconsin Main Street Program that result in a compact, high density, and pedestrian-friendly downtown core, amenities generally not associated with suburbia.

Emphasize historic preservation. The most effective way to maintain and enhance a strong sense of place in downtown is to preserve the historical character that makes downtown distinctive and unique compared to other environments. Many small city main streets, for instance, contain architectural gems that are hidden beneath 1960s aluminum slipcovers (false facades). Cities should work to encourage building owners to uncover these original facades.

Do not overemphasize parking. Most cities think that parking is their greatest problem when, in reality, it rarely is. Providing more parking spaces will not bring more people downtown. Certainly the amount, type, use, and location of parking should be examined and parking considerations should be integrated with all proposed downtown projects. But remember, parking is only one part of the total downtown puzzle and not the exaggerated juggernaut downtown interests claim. Surface parking lots, where absolutely necessary, should be handsomely landscaped and located behind main street buildings rather than directly on the main street.

Make better use of upper floors. Traditional main streets often contain too much vacant or underutilized space above street level that could be converted into offices or apartments. The more effective utilization of upper floors makes buildings more valuable, increases downtown activity levels and densities, and can add to the amount of affordable housing in the city. All new development in downtown should be encouraged to include multiple stories. Cities can assist both new development and the rehabilitation of existing space by amending zoning and building codes where applicable, providing financial assistance, and streamlining the building permit process.

Develop design guidelines. Some measure of public control -- beyond basic zoning -- is necessary to ensure that new building development and the redevelopment of older buildings integrates with the character and fabric of the downtown as a whole. A design review process helps ensure this integration. A poorly designed building may do more damage than good. For example, a new building set back from the street with ample parking provided in front will probably interrupt the continuity of the streetscape, rendering it less pedestrian-friendly and compromising the integrity of the surrounding traditional buildings.

Strive for a multi-functional downtown. The healthiest downtowns are those that include the most varied types of

activities such as shopping, services, work, government, culture, the arts, recreation, entertainment, dining, housing, and tourism. Different functions bring different types of people downtown at different times of the day and week, thereby increasing the volume and distribution of downtown activity levels.

Final points to consider

A healthy downtown is a worthwhile pursuit for most cities for reasons related to a community's economy, heritage, and image. Moreover, many cities consider a vital downtown as an intrinsic element for a strong sense of community. It is important to remember, however, that each downtown is distinctive and that these guiding principles should be applied to best take advantage of local amenities, heritage, and opportunities. While it is often helpful to visit other downtowns to observe their efforts and to stimulate ideas, keep in mind that simply replicating other cities' success stories is generally not advisable. Not only might the circumstances leading to the effective implementation differ from one city to the next, but you may compromise your opportunity to make your community's downtown area unique.

*Kent Robertson is professor of Community Studies at St. Cloud State University in St. Cloud, MN, specializing in small city downtown development. Robertson can be reached at (320)255-3184 or kent@stcloudstate.edu. This article is reprinted with permission from the October 1997 issue of *Minnesota Cities* magazine, a publication of the League of Minnesota Cities. For more information, please call (651) 281-1200.

Center For Community Economic Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension
1327 University Avenue, Madison, WI 53715

PH: (608)265-8136; FAX: (608)263-4999; TTY: (800)947-3529; HTTP://WWW.UWEX.EDU/CES/CCED

An EEO/Affirmative Action Employer, UW-Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming, including Title IX and ADA requirements.