



Downtown Sebring CRA Business Recruitment and Retention Plan

June 2010

As the summer months draw to a close and the summer streetscape project ends, Downtown Sebring will need to implement a plan of action in order to develop and grow into a thriving downtown district. Three sets of actions will guide future downtown business development strategically. These actions emphasize new business recruitment, current business retention and building a more cohesive downtown district. Below are recommendations for the Sebring CRA to consider implementing in 2010-2011.

I. New Business Recruitment

A. Establish a Business Recruitment Committee

Goals: To encourage entrepreneurship; maintain and develop the CRA as a mixed-use, multi-purpose center; and strengthen existing businesses and the business mix.

Format: Committee should consist of 5-7 participants and may include business owners, real estate professionals, building owners, bankers, chamber and economic development representatives and elected officials.

Objective: Serve as management entity for recruitment efforts, focusing on those properties and areas that are critical for the economic success of the CRA.

Committee tasks:

- 1) The Committee must develop and articulate a clear market position statement for the CRA, which will describe the type of retail mix, shopping environment, and the target customer. This statement should distinguish Downtown Sebring's CRA from other shopping areas.
- 2) Develop a "wish list" of potential businesses that would complement and strengthen the existing businesses and properly reflect the market position statement.
- 3) Ensure Downtown Sebring CRA District is ready for recruitment.
 - 1) Is it an inviting place to do business?
 - 2) Is it visibly active, attractive, convenient and safe?

- 3) Are there business investment barriers? (higher land costs, title problems, permitting complexity, zoning limitations, site preparation and construction costs, etc). If so, the Committee should work with business and community leaders to minimize these barriers.
 - 4) Have proper incentive programs in place and properly outlined (i.e. Restaurant Incentive Program, Facade Grants, technical assistance, financing of building improvements, counseling with local financial institutions, district wide image and marketing programs, an effective business to business networking system, etc)
- 4) Generate Leads
- 1) Existing Businesses Within or Near District
 - 2) Emerging Entrepreneurs
 - 3) Existing Local or Regional Businesses
 - 4) National Chains
- 5) Develop Courting and Solicitation Process
- 1) Personalized letter with Recruitment Packet
 - 2) Follow up phone call with invitation for personal meeting from Committee Member
 - 3) Invitation to tour district
 - 4) Thank you letter after personal meeting and on-site tour
 - 5) Follow up with contact. If interested, proceed with an action plan and necessary assistance to move forward.

B. Develop a Business Recruitment Packet

Typically, materials are provided in print form; however, they should also be available electronically. The packets should include:

- 1) Demographics - At minimum, general population make up (gender, age, race, income, etc), as well as spending potential of general population and citywide demographics. Best displayed as maps, tables, charts, graphs.
 - 1) Number of people who live within 10 miles of CRA
 - 1) Average household income
 - 2) Median home value
 - 2) Number of people who work within CRA
 - 1) Average annual income
- 2) General Market Data - Includes housing market, employment rates in area, existing business mix, current investment rates, tourism information, traffic counts and pedestrian foot traffic numbers.
 - 1) Example: 38,000 cars travel Main Street/day; 200 shops and salons; 85% independent merchants
- 3) Current and Planned Projects - Relevant information on this topic should include the project location, intended use, occupied space (gross square feet), expected completion date, market absorption rate, current square feet per use. Most effectively portrayed in map format.
- 4) Commercial and Office Property Listings - Helps highlight the existing business mix as well as profile the type and quality of existing structures. Details should include: building/space size, cost per square foot, intended or current use, location. Does not need to include current

vacancy listings; should include contact information for each structure/space for potential businesses to contact for additional information. Best portrayed with maps.

- 5) Business Basics/Start Up Information - Useful to both potential and existing businesses. Information should include: zoning and land use regulations, annual promotions/marketing/events calendar, contact information for relevant businesses/agencies (electric, water hook ups, etc), tax rates, any special features of the community, financial incentives, grants, loans, anticipated development timeline (from proposal to final occupancy permit).
- 6) Other Information - Overview with photos, wish list of new businesses supported by demand and supply data, market position statement, trade area, economic statistics, demographic and lifestyle data, descriptions of target market segments, and incentives program overview.
 - 1) Upcoming Event Information
 - 2) Available Resources (people & publications)
 - 3) New Market Opportunities
- 7) Visuals - Graphs and maps are effective ways to describe the district, local area, retail competition and development trends.
- 8) Beautification - An overview of Downtown Sebring's beautification efforts to date, as well as future programs that will continually enhance the area as a destination for residents and visitors.
- 9) Marketing & Promotion - The Downtown Sebring CRA provides strategic marketing services to promote the entire Downtown Sebring area, which is an added benefit for new businesses over and above strip malls and other potential locations.
- 10) Tax Credits, Employee Training and Other Business Benefits - Provide a one-page overview of the various tax credits, business benefits and training opportunities that are available to businesses in the Downtown Sebring CRA district.

C. Develop Financial Incentive Programs

Financial incentive programs are a critical component to a successful downtown revitalization program, especially when there is proven competition for new business establishment (US 27). Incentives must address critical priorities/issues that also benefit the overall downtown, as well as the individual business owner. Multiple incentives/packaging efforts are becoming the trend and are very popular in other CRA districts. These business development activities most often stimulate building improvements.

Examples of small-scale improvements/business development:

- Matching grants for storefront/sign/facade improvements
- Low-interest/revolving loan fund
- Inventory grants
- Micro-loan programs for business start-ups/expansion
- Design assistance
- Business assistance
- Lighting Grant Program
- Sign Grant Program
- Quarterly Business Seminars

- Regular Merchant Meetings
- New Business Recruitment Loans
- Cluster Marketing Grants
(Example: \$250-\$1,000; must be at least two merchants; For every \$2/applicants, matching funds of \$1 will be provided for marketing initiatives.)

Examples of major building rehab projects:

- Low-interest/revolving loan fund
- Public sector - TIF, loans
- Federal & State historic tax credits
- New Markets Tax Credits
- State programs/DOT Transportation Enhancement Program
- CDBG (HUD) funds

II. Existing Business Retention

A. Provide Business Training & Technical Assistance

Existing business retention is a high priority strategy for Sebring CRA. Economic conditions have created hardships for many businesses, and to prevent further erosion of Downtown Sebring's business sector, it is important to retain and assist existing businesses.

Many business owners have expressed a need or desire for assistance with marketing, merchandising, business management tools, etc. Workshops in areas such as marketing, merchandising, accounting and employee training would be helpful, as well as professional design assistance to improve buildings and landscaping.

B. Create a Low-Interest Loan Pool

Often business and property owners have the desire to make improvements, but do not have readily available cash to do it. The CRA could work with local banks to form a low-interest loan pool for business diversification or expansion, and property improvements.

C. Support Expansion/Diversification Candidates

A few businesses expressed a desire to diversify or expand their business operations, based on potential in the marketplace. The CRA should ensure that these businesses' needs are being met in order to accomplish their goals, provided the goals are consistent with the identified Downtown markets, niches and strategy. Downtown's niches are as follows:

- * Specialty Retail (clothing, gifts, books, office supplies, business support services)
- * Social Retail (eg. dining, entertainment, bakery)
- * Personal & Professional Services (health & beauty, legal & financial)
- * Tourist Services (lodging, recreation, entertainment, information, art & culture)
- * Heritage Focus: Historical Society, Historic Buildings, Museum, etc.
- * Connection to Lake Jackson - relaxation, walking, etc.

D. Create and Enforce a Downtown Parking Policy

Convenient parking and customer access is critical to any successful business. Therefore, priority for on-street parking in Downtown must go to customers, not business owners or employees. However, if owners/employees are to use designated parking lots, the lots must be accessible, well-lit (for safety) and paved. The walking routes to and from the lots also must be well-lit with sidewalks. Once appropriate designated parking is in place, business and property owners could be asked to sign a voluntary policy or agreement to use designated lots - and to require their employees to use them. Business owners could watch for violators, and tickets should be issued accordingly. Fines could go into a fund for Downtown events, promotion, beautification, etc. If designated employee parking is created, and a reasonable parking policy is enacted and enforced, Downtown businesses should not experience a parking problem for their customers.

Convenience is key as Circle parking and parallel parking are often not the most ideal for entering and leaving the parking space.

The CRA should begin planning for a Downtown Parking Garage. Also, signage for any reserved parking should include time of day the parking is reserved. For example, a professional office may only reserve parking from 8-5, then the parking spot should be available to the general public for evening events. Signage should indicate this.

E. Implement Image/Awareness Promotions

One of Downtown's greatest challenges is the impression that it is in decline. A proactive effort is needed to convey the message to Sebring residents that "Big Things Are Happening in Downtown Sebring!" The Downtown Sebring CRA needs to implement a promotion campaign that includes the following:

- * Press releases about planned improvements
- * Fliers and ads about plans and events (e.g., with "Today" and "Tomorrow" images)
- * Lists of goods and services available Downtown
- * Cooperative special events and promotions
- * Awareness-building about the value of Downtown as the City's center
- * Ways for local citizens to become involved in the improvements to Downtown

Effective promotion requires expertise and should be marketed as a cohesive group of goods and services. Promotion should be targeted strategically to Downtown's markets, and focus on its unique characteristics and mix of products and services. Positive changes in Downtown should be publicized at least once or twice monthly, so customers are intrigued to "come and see for themselves what's happening Downtown.. By creating a "buzz" of interest, Downtown begins to build momentum for revitalization efforts. This will also assist existing business owners and help attract new ones as overall Downtown Sebring marketing services are already and continually being provided.

III. Create a More Cohesive Downtown

A. Implement Cooperative Promotions to Reach Strategic Target

Downtown events and promotions should target specific markets, and then all (or most) businesses cooperate in promoting that event or theme. Examples of cooperative promotion efforts include seasonal streetscape banners, a business directory/map to Downtown, advertising, direct mail campaign and niche events.

Businesses should also cross-promote for each other. One idea is to provide small brochure racks or business card holders for each merchant. In addition, a gift store can set up an interesting seasonal product display in the hotel lobby; an art store could display products in the restaurant; the retail store could display restaurant menus and hotel brochures, etc. Cross-promotion efforts should be mutual, and displays should clearly identify the merchants who provide the products or services.

B. Highlight History of Downtown and Community

Downtown Sebring has outstanding historical resources, and they should be highlighted for residents and visitors alike. A walking tour brochure describing the historic buildings, community history and museum collection could be used by schoolchildren, residents, visiting family and friends, and heritage/cultural tourists.

C. Address Pedestrian Customer Comfort Issues

Downtown is a pedestrian-oriented district, and as such, it also should be a pedestrian-priority area. Pedestrians who feel comfortable and safe will spend more time (and money) in Downtown. To ensure a comfortable place, consider Downtown as "home." The entries from North and South Ridgewood, as well as the Parkway are the "front door." The visitor center and City parking lot are the "living room." The streets and sidewalks are "hallways and passages." The buildings and parks are "rooms." In this context, is the "home" inviting? Does it feel comfortable? Are the hallways well-lit? Does the roof leak? Are the carpets worn? Are there places to sit and relax? Entertaining things for kids? Social places for adults? Downtown needs to consider enhancements that will make customers feel more comfortable (like crosswalks, lighting, benches, children's/youth items, awnings) will make the "home" inviting.

D. Engage Citizens in Improvements

If Downtown is the heart of the community, then all citizens have a stake in its success - **everyone** "owns" Downtown. However, many citizens do not feel a sense of "ownership." A Downtown revitalization effort presents many opportunities for citizens to become engaged in the process, from planting flowers to buying personalized bricks for a plaza to constructing a historical walk. The partnership should tap into the community's volunteer spirit to accomplish some short-term projects Downtown, so that citizens can re-connect with their town center.

Downtown Sebring's Centennial Birthday in 2012 is the perfect goal to aim for in getting the Downtown revitalized and ready for its important birthday and the celebrations that should accompany this 100 year mark.

E. Track Performance

The success of Downtown revitalization efforts should be tracked and quantified. Factors to measure include storefront vacancy rate, event attendance, business sales, foot traffic counts, amount of publicity generated, community participation, buildings rehabilitated, amount of public and private sector investment per year, etc. Volunteers (youth, seniors) could assist with the tracking efforts (for example, youth doing court-ordered community service time could conduct foot traffic counts). A simple tracking database should be established and maintained by the CRA so that results can be collected quarterly and tracked for effectiveness over time.

F. Continue “What’s Up Downtown?” Meetings

The establishment of regular monthly meetings has become a success with Downtown merchants, tourism officials, Chamber reps, elected officials, residents and all interested in the success of Downtown Sebring. These should be continued and coordinated/hosted by the CRA to provide a neutral presence at the meetings.

Summary

This document is merely a proposed plan of action for the CRA to consider. After thorough review of this plan, the CRA can decide to implement all or parts of the plan, which will require financial and staff resources, as well as committee member time. It is important to remember that partnerships and collaborations be strengthened to increase market opportunities and move the Downtown Sebring CRA’s vision of a vibrant and active downtown district forward.