



Downtown Idea Exchange

Essential Information for Downtown Revitalization

September 2010

Perspectives

Revitalizing America's downtowns in the 21st Century

By Roger L. Kemp

Our ideals about the “American Dream,” raising children in a single-family house with a yard, away from the traffic and noise downtown, are always changing. There are families where the children have grown, and they would like to relocate in urban downtown areas. There are young professionals that would like to focus on their jobs before starting a family. They wish to locate in inner-city areas and relocate to the suburbs later in life. There's also another group, consisting of those folks that would like to live their lives without having a vehicle. Hence the new type of residential developments around public transit stations called Transit-Oriented Developments. There is also a rapidly developing market for condominiums and townhouses that are located next to public light-rail transit systems.

There is a national need, a community one, too, to make downtowns attractive to these aspiring new residents. Such positive movements require states, and their local governments, and especially those that manage downtowns, to advocate for changes that will benefit downtown areas.

Trends in downtown development

I think history has gone, or is going, full circle in this regard. I was recently looking at a picture of a residential area in the Lower East Side of New York City from a century ago. Individuals and families lived in several story residential structures, with an assortment of commercial businesses located on the ground floor. All of the restaurants, markets, and other types of commercial activity, took place at street level.

Then over the years we separated our zoning areas based on different land uses. After all, you would not want citizens living in commercial or industrial areas. This is now rapidly changing back.

If you wish to revitalize your downtowns, you must change your zoning to allow for mixed-uses of commercial (on the ground floor) and residential (on the floors above that). Downtown managers should work with their planning directors to initiate these

If you wish to revitalize your downtowns, you must change your zoning to allow for mixed-uses.

This article was reprinted from the September 2010 issue of *Downtown Idea Exchange*.

Interested readers may subscribe to the monthly newsletter by visiting <http://www.downtowndevelopment.com> or phoning (973) 265-2300.

© 2010 Alexander Communications Group, Inc. All rights reserved.

No part of this article may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise without the prior written permission of Alexander Communications Group.

changes, which would ultimately require the approval of elected officials.

Also, arts, entertainment, and culture are coming back to downtown areas. Cities are using libraries and museums as tools to stimulate economic development. They are also trying to lure educational institutions and not-for-profit organizations back downtown. Some states are even relocating some of their offices from the suburbs back into their downtown areas. There's also a big trend to preserve what's left of nature downtown, as well as restore what's been removed over the decades, as well as expand various aspects of nature. This includes parks, wetlands, waterways, as well as ways to enhance pedestrian access and movement through the use of walkways, bikeways, plazas, and the widening of public areas to accommodate people as opposed to cars.

Times have changed. Streets are now getting narrower, as the number of lanes to accommodate traffic are getting fewer. Sidewalks are now getting wider — as well as greener. This trend has facilitated the movement of people back to downtown areas. It's also great for those commercial businesses established on the ground level to have their market built-in above them. No need for those one-story commercial centers and blocks of the past. Rezoning them and placing residential units above them is the wave of the future. If you build them, people will come, especially if there's public transit in the area.

Some of our nation's major evolving downtown trends are highlighted below:

- Restoration and enhancement of nature,
- Buildings that have mixed-uses, and are multi-story in their height,
- Making public transit available, usually light-rail,
- To restore the public infrastructure to favor people over cars,
- To combine landscaping with the restoration of all aspects of the public infrastructure,

- Surface parking lots are being converted to parks, gardens, and open spaces,
- Attract culture, the arts, and entertainment facilities,
- Attract educational institutions and non-profit organizations,
- While many businesses have located to malls, smaller specialized ones have gone downtown,
- Focus downtown on ethnic and niche stores, such as markets, delicatessens, bakeries, and restaurants, and
- A sense of “public place” is being restored in the core of our “new” downtowns.

The role of public officials

Many of the items on this list, if accomplished by a city government, would stimulate the local economy, and attract the type of businesses, educational institutions, and nonprofit organizations that would benefit the rebirth and growth of our downtown areas. Additional incentives would further facilitate the attraction of desirable private, educational, and not-for-profit sector additions to our downtowns. As we all know, to sell economic development incentives to local public officials, they must be reasonable as well as have a long-term benefit to the taxpayers.

More importantly, those public officials elected by the citizens must feel comfortable with such incentives, as well as feel that they will improve their downtown. They must also benefit all of the citizens within the community. A downtown should not only serve as a great public place for those folks that live there, but for other citizens in the community as well. They should not only be attracted to “their” downtown, but they should also feel comfortable within the entire inner-city area. The various trends outlined above, when facilitated by local public officials, will make these trends a common reality!

Public officials, both elected and appointed, should always keep in mind that prudent economic development incentives are a wise way to increase a local government's revenues without raising its taxes. During these difficult times, the above practices should be embraced and facilitated by politicians, downtown professionals, and citizens alike, since they will assist in balancing their community's budget with the increased revenues that result from renewing a community's downtown.

Most cities evolved piecemeal over the years, and now need to be retrofitted and redesigned for the future. Planning and zoning regulations should be in place to accommodate mixed land-uses, infill, and redevelopment projects. Call it New Urban-

ism, Sustainability, Pedestrian Cities, Healthy Cities, Inner-City Renewal, or the Green Cities Movement, whatever you wish. We must all work together to get things moving in these evolving positive directions.

Most of us in local government work on our "own" issues and problems, and seldom have time to research national best practices and trends. The practices facilitated by these downtown trends can be increasingly applied to projects of all sizes — from a single building, to a full block, to a neighborhood, and even to an entire community.

*Roger L. Kemp is a career city manager, adjunct professor, and author/editor of nearly 50 books dealing with best practices for cities. The president of Kemp Consulting, LLC, he can be reached at rlkbsr@snet.net. **DIX***