

## **Downtown Vitality and Community Placemaking Team Plan: Situation**

Many communities in Wisconsin are involved in some level of downtown revitalization activity. In these communities, the renewed efforts have elevated the discussion among local government officials, the business community and the general citizenry. So what does the research say about trends and the relative emphasis surrounding downtown improvements, and why are so many communities exerting energy on downtown vitality matters?

Smaller city and village downtowns have seen many challenges over the past 40 years. Increasing use of the automobile and the decentralization of many functions that had been basic to downtowns resulted in a shift of commercial development to the peripheries of our cities and villages. Some cities began a pattern of disinvestment in downtown, and the image of a declining downtown became a more common notion in the minds of many individuals.

But communities have not given up on their downtowns. Many strategies have been tried to address the challenges faced by shifts in community development patterns and market forces. The National Main Street Center has been conducting research and surveys on downtown trends over the last ten years, and their findings suggest that Main Street districts, at least those with revitalization programs, have been on the rebound since 1998. Sales and property values are up, as are occupancy rates, rents and numbers of visitors. An article in the Journal of the American Planning Association reported national survey results indicating that almost 70% of the sample cities have seen increased vitality in their downtowns. What can be learned and applied to communities from throughout Wisconsin from this research?

Downtowns do play a critical role in the health of most freestanding small cities and villages in the United States. They comprise a sizable share of the community's tax base, and are the site of major public facilities and public investment. Downtowns contain many of the oldest and most recognizable buildings and embody the heritage of a community. Downtowns have served as the traditional gathering place for parades, festivals, celebrations and other community events. The downtown represents the heart and soul of most small cities and villages. For many communities, the need to revitalize downtown commercial districts is clear since a healthy, viable downtown is crucial to their heritage, economic health and civic pride. And revitalized downtowns are symbols of community caring and a high quality of life.

Research has also demonstrated which strategies have been most commonly used and successful in bringing back the vitality to downtowns. Experience shows that success is strongly correlated with the downtown's ability to project a strong "sense of place" or people-friendly places which feel good, are unique and authentic, have a variety of services and are well-used and active. To reinforce this strong sense of place, most frequently used redevelopment strategies include: 1) renovating and preserving historic structures, 2) making downtown more pedestrian-friendly through streetscape

improvements (new plazas, street trees, human-scaled lighting, benches, etc.), 3) attracting people to live downtown or visit for entertainment, retail or tourist activities, and 4) embracing the “Main Street Approach”. Either by formal or informal application, the Main Street Approach recognizes that a system of four principles must be understood and committed to by the community. To be effective, this approach balances and integrates a framework which:

- ◆ organizes downtown interests.
- ◆ enhances visual qualities and the built-environment through sound design principles.
- ◆ considers economic restructuring and diversification.
- ◆ markets and promotes downtown opportunities.

The former director of the National Main Street Center expressed these summary thoughts about downtown: “Some Main Streets have some rough spots, but on Main Street you can see the evolution of an entire community unfold before your eyes. Downtown places survive only because, in every generation, a group of people make a conscious decision to take care of them and pass them along.”

Downtown revitalization and management is still a relatively new discipline and every community will have to endure some “rough spots”. However, Wisconsin’s cities and villages are increasingly realizing that a distinctive downtown with multiple functions, a working public/private partnership and a discernable sense of place will help assure competitive and livable communities for the future.

Given this situation, the University of Wisconsin-Extension has established a Downtown Vitality and Community Placemaking Team to provide a response to help communities revitalize downtowns and move towards a vision of livable communities with a strong sense of place.

**Source:** Prepared by Steve Grabow, Professor, University of Wisconsin-Extension (for the Downtown Vitality and Community Placemaking Team Plan, April 2004.)