

Developing a Downtown Strategic Plan

A recent Brookings Institution Research Brief by Christopher B. Leinberger summarizes twelve steps in revitalizing a downtown area.* An important and early step in the process is the development of a Downtown Strategic Plan.

Downtown is one of the largest mixed use developments in a metropolitan area (and perhaps the largest in many small cities). However, there is rarely a strategic plan for downtown, nor any formal management of it. By contrast, the typical regional mall, a much smaller and far simpler development, has a comprehensive strategy for the positioning of the mall and 24/7 oversight.

Leinberger offers a comprehensive approach to strategic planning that creates “walkable urbanity,” the appeal of traditional downtowns that sets them apart from their suburban competitors. These strategies fall into ten categories:

Character

Define the boundaries of downtown, how dense it should be, and how it addresses the immediate surrounding neighborhoods. Generally, urban character (floor area ratio over 1.0) is selected for the core of the downtown, pushing densities to the highest level in the metropolitan area. If there is a suburban character (floor area ratio of between 0.2 and 0.4) in the neighborhoods surrounding downtown, this can and should be maintained, thus providing those residents with the best of two worlds: suburban homes a short distance from walkable urbanity.

Housing

Encourage a vast array of moderate and high density housing at both market rate and affordable levels. Downtown planners must work to ensure that such housing is legally allowed. They should also take an inventory of city-owned land and buildings that could be available for early development or redevelopment since the land will have to be written down or creatively provided to make it financially feasible in the early years of the turnaround process. It is important to realize that housing

is two-thirds of the built environment, so it is always a critical part of the strategy.

Retail

Determine the retail concentrations that a downtown market could support, including urban entertainment (movies, restaurants, night clubs); specialty retail (clothing, furniture, and jewelry boutique stores); regional retail (department stores, lifestyle retail); and local-serving retail (grocery, drug, book, video stores). These different retail options should be concentrated into walkable districts, creating, in essence, regional destinations that give the area critical mass, identity, and a reason to live there.

Culture

Determine which one-of-a-kind cultural facilities should be downtown and how existing facilities can be strengthened. With very few exceptions, these facilities—arenas, stadiums, performing arts centers, museums, historic sites and buildings, and others—do in fact perform better downtown.

Public Infrastructure

Focus on essential issues such as water and sewer, intra-core transit, transit to the downtown, structured parking, conversion of one-way streets to two-way, tighter turning radiuses at intersections for a better pedestrian experience, and enhanced security and cleanliness, among others. Parks and open space, and, when appropriate, opportunities for waterfront development, should also be included in the strategy. Paying for this new and improved infrastructure often involves “tax increment financing” (“TIFs”), a controversial tool in some places, which usually needs state legislative authorization.



Employment

Focus recruitment efforts on businesses that could be downtown, which includes both "export" employment (businesses that export goods and services from the metropolitan area which provide fresh cash into the economy) and regional-servicing employment (support businesses or organizations which locate in regional concentrations such as downtown). Generally these strategies occur later in the turn-around process, after a critical mass of urban entertainment and housing has occurred.

Community Involvement

Ensure that citizens, particularly residents of surrounding neighborhoods, have continuous opportunities for input and involvement. It is also important to keep the opinion-makers and the media informed about the revitalization process, as the public image of downtown during the early phases of revitalization is generally negative. One example is creating a local cable TV show highlighting individuals and businesses helping turn around the downtown, putting a human face on the revitalization effort.

Involvement of Non-profit Organizations

Bring existing non-profits into the process, and create new organizations to fill needed roles. These include business improvement districts and possibly a transportation management organization, as well as temporary task forces, a parking authority, an arts' coordinating group, and others.

Marketing

Continuously market downtown, as well as specific new downtown events. The image of most downtowns is so negative prior to revitalization and such skepticism exists during the early phases that constant attention must be paid to re-positioning the area. It is especially important to communicate the strategy and progress in implementing it to the investment and banking community so they will have faith in the process in which they are being asked to invest.

Social Values

The social values of downtown need to be defined and plans put in place to enforce them. The ultimate goal of a downtown revitalization is to make it the community gathering place, a place for the entire community regardless of income or race. Housing affordability and other "equity" programs may be essential components of the revitalization effort.

The process for determining the comprehensive strategy starts by bringing together an expanded version of the advisory group. The group should include neighborhood group representatives, retailers, investors, developers, property owners, churches, the mayor and key city councilors, the heads of select city departments, non-profit organizations, artists, homeless advocates, and others. Selecting the right composition is extremely important to ensure that no significant group feels left out. The group needs to be relatively small (less than 25 individuals), however, in order to both build a sense of trust and cohesion and, ultimately, to ensure the process stays focused on results. It is also crucial that the individuals be people who are interested in successful solutions, not narrow political gain. [Leinberger offers guidance in how to bring the advisory group together in a series of meetings. See full article]

Many smaller communities are also experiencing pent-up consumer demand for walkable, vibrant places to live, work and play. While the strategic planning components outlined in this article referred to larger cities, they can equally be applied to smaller city downtowns and neighborhood business districts. The components provide a solid foundation for any downtown revitalization effort.

Source: Turning Around Downtown: Twelve Steps to Revitalization by Christopher B. Leinberger, Research Brief, The Brookings Institution, March 7, 2005. View the entire paper online at: http://www.brookings.edu/metro/pubs/20050307_12steps.htm
Image from the Town of Blacksburg, VA, Economic Development Department website.

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