Knowledge Synthesis

CREATING A VIBRANT DOWNTOWN

Ian Wong
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INTRODUCTION

> *This knowledge synthesis is part of The Monieson Centre's Knowledge Impact in Society (KIS) Project, a three-year endeavour to connect academic knowledge with economic development needs in Eastern Ontario. The synthesis is an accessible presentation of the latest research on issues affecting rural Eastern Ontario. The knowledge synthesis topics were determined through information gathered at 15 community workshops run in partnership with the Eastern Ontario Community Futures Development Corporation network. The KIS Project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. For more information, visit www.easternontarioknowledge.ca.*

Downtowns play a crucial role in the economic health of a town or city. Downtowns that are vibrant stimulate economic and business activity in the area and attract visiting tourists. A sizable share of a town or city's tax base is derived from downtown economic activity. In addition, downtowns embody the heritage of a community and portray the image that people have of the town or city. An aesthetically pleasing downtown that is full of activity, particularly pedestrian activity, conveys a positive and attractive image of the community, which in turn attracts more visitors to the downtown core. As such, creating a vibrant downtown should be an important goal for community leaders.

STRATEGIES TO CREATE A VIBRANT DOWNTOWN

Organize a Team

The first step in creating a vibrant downtown is for community leaders to be involved and committed to take action. Community leaders should organize themselves to work together in a team or a committee (e.g., Revitalization Steering Committee) to provide human and financial resources. Research has determined that such committees help ensure stakeholders work together towards mutual benefit. Downtown revitalization is a complex process and requires effort on many different fronts. Therefore, it is best to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders who possess a variety of interests, perspectives, and resources (See Appendix A for a list of stakeholders who could be part of the team).[1] For instance:

- A business improvement association (BIA) focuses on promotion of retail sales
- The Chamber of Commerce fosters tourism and business recruitment

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[1] "Organizing a Working Team," The Government of Ontario, 2005, http://www.reddi.gov.on.ca/dr_organizing.htm (Accessed April 6, 2009).

- The municipal government works to maintain a strong tax base to provide adequate municipal services and infrastructure improvements
- Building owners are interested in building renovations

Once the team is brought together, meetings should be arranged to determine the issues, challenges, and opportunities facing the downtown area. Also, community leaders need to establish an overall vision for revitalization efforts. This can unite stakeholders despite their diverse interests. Last, a detailed work plan should be created to turn the identified desired results into reality.[2]

Apply for Funding through Main Street Ontario

Once stakeholders in the community have come together, it is beneficial for them to apply for funding so they can initiate downtown improvements. In 2009, the Government of Ontario's Rural Economic Development program (RED) created an annual application opportunity for communities seeking to use the Main Street approach to downtown revitalization.[3] The Main Street approach is a well-established downtown development method that places emphasis on four areas, namely, economic development, marketing and promotions, organizational development, and physical improvements. Communities can receive funding matched to 50% of project costs up to a maximum of $150,000 over 3 years. This funding is intended to be used to hire a full-time downtown revitalization coordinator to coordinate a team (as mentioned above) and to implement and monitor the action plan. It should be noted that this program is recommended for:

1) Communities with at least 50 commercial enterprises or 70 structures/storefronts in the downtown; and,
2) Communities with population under 100,000.

More information about the Main Street Ontario program is available at:
http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/rural/red/live/docs/mainstreetguide.pdf

Promote Diversity of Use

A classic urban design principle for downtown revitalization is to promote diversity of use.[4] Vibrant downtowns contain a mix of uses that establish a diverse and lively business and leisure environment. This brings different types of people downtown for different reasons at various times of the day and week. As such, community leaders should keep diversity of use in mind when deciding what to do with vacant buildings and land. For instance, a disproportionate amount of office space might make the downtown area dead in the evenings. In this case, community leaders could try to attract businesses that provide entertainment activities (e.g., pubs, nightclubs, movie theatres) to bring people downtown at night and on weekends.

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[2] "Implementing the Plan," The Government of Ontario, 2005, http://www.reddi.gov.on.ca/dr_implementplan.htm (Accessed April 6, 2009).
[3] "Rural Economic Development (RED) Program: Main Street Ontario Guidelines," The Government of Ontario, 2009, http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/rural/red/live/docs/mainstreetguide.pdf (Accessed April 15, 2009).
[4] Cy Paumier, *Creating a Vibrant City Center*: *Urban Design and Regeneration Principles*. (Washington: ULI, 2004), p. 17.

A recent strategy that has been used to make downtowns multifunctional is to promote the creation of downtown housing.[5] This provides increased traffic and a human presence during non-business hours and increases the market for downtown businesses.[6] Urban living also promotes the downtown's image as a safe area. Community leaders can encourage real estate developers to develop housing in the downtown core. Downtown housing can also be marketed to singles, seniors, empty-nesters, and young professionals.

Improve Pedestrianization

Pedestrianization focuses on making the downtown more pedestrian friendly. This goal is beneficial for a number of reasons. First, having more pedestrians increases downtown economic activity, as more goods and services are demanded. Secondly, pedestrians improve the downtown's image. Researchers suggest that the positive image of a downtown is gauged more so by the volume of pedestrian activity than economic indicators.[7] Without pedestrians, a downtown can look lifeless and uninteresting, no matter how aesthetically pleasing the area may be.

The quality of the experience of walking through a downtown is a key measure of its success as a sense of place and community. As such, despite the importance of vehicular access and parking, pedestrians should be given clear priority to encourage walking. People will choose to walk in downtown areas if they are comfortable, convenient, safe, interesting, beautiful, and enjoyable. This can be done by:[8]

- Widening and maintaining sidewalks and walkways
- Improving safety and security
- Reducing traffic speeds
- Ensuring overall cleanliness
- Promoting environmental friendliness, including providing recycling disposal bins
- Creating more sitting spaces
- Making streets easier to cross by adding crosswalks
- Making streetscape improvements to beautify the downtown environment (e.g. flowers, trees, interesting lighting, attractive pavement, banners, brick pavers) [9]
- Encouraging business owners to have attractive building facades, awnings, and store windows
- Locating parking facilities in less conspicuous places as parking facilities can be a major pedestrian impediment

One city that has been successful in beautifying its downtown area to increase pedestrianization is Brandon, Manitoba. Community leaders planted trees, replaced old signs with newer brighter signs, installed wrought iron benches, built heritage lamp posts, and installed matching garbage containers,

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[5] Kent Robertson, "Can Small-City Downtowns Remain Viable? A National Study of Development Issues and Strategies," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 65 (1999).

[6] Dagney Faulk, "The Process and Practice of Downtown Revitalization," *Review of Policy Research* 23 (2006).

[7] Kent Robertson, "Downtown Redevelopment Strategies in the United States," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 61 (1995).

[8] Michael Burayidi, *Downtowns: Revitalizing the Centers of Small Urban Communities.* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 18.

[9] Robertson, "Can Small-City Downtowns Remain Viable?"

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fencing and antique fire hydrants. These improvements have made Brandon's downtown a pedestrian friendly area.[10]

Another important urban planning principle is density. Jane Jacobs, a well-known and respected writer on urban planning, emphasizes the importance of density in the downtown core, and acknowledges how it promotes pedestrian traffic.[11] Density creates a critical mass of activity easily accessible by foot. As such, community leaders should try to encourage various organizations to fill vacant downtown buildings. Even small gaps in the continuity of buildings can inhibit the flow of pedestrian activity.[12]

Encourage Historic Preservation and Building Renovations

Many downtowns have architecturally distinctive old buildings that are attractive and represent a downtown's heritage. These buildings characterize a downtown's sense of community and sense of place. Unfortunately, in many cases these structures are underused, empty, and/or run-down. By preserving old, historic downtown buildings, communities can help to make their downtown more appealing. This, in turn, should attract more visitors, both residents and tourists. A more attractive downtown should also attract more private investments. In a survey of 57 small cities in North America, historic preservation was cited as the most common downtown revitalization strategy.[13]

Preservation efforts can consist of renovating a storefront or building façade. It can also consist of converting and renovating buildings for different uses. For example, a structure built for one purpose (e.g., a railroad terminal, theatre) can be converted to a different one (e.g., a restaurant, commercial building). To encourage preservation activity, community leaders can provide downtown store owners with financial incentives for façade beautification of old buildings. Community leaders can also encourage financial institutions to provide low-interest loans to businesses engaging in renovation efforts of historic structures.

It should be noted that preservation activities require careful planning. Renovated buildings should be integrated with the character and fabric of the downtown design. To ensure this is done, communities can establish design guidelines and regulations.[14] The strictness of guideline enforcement is up to community leaders. Some communities have designated a "Code Enforcement Officer" who grants permission for external changes made to buildings. A less strict approach is to use design guidelines that are voluntary unless tied to financial assistance. Design experts or assistance committees can provide help to building owners to implement upgrades that are in accordance with design regulations.

Identify and Promote Niches

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[10] Burayidi, pp. 94-95.

[11] Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. (New York: Random House, 1993), p. 262.

[12] Cy Paumier, *Creating a Vibrant City Center*: *Urban Design and Regeneration Principles*. (Washington: ULI, 2004), 18.

[13] Robertson, "Can Small-City Downtowns Remain Viable?"

[14] Burayidi, p. 15.

Many downtowns have numerous businesses which offer similar products or services. This is called a "niche". For example, in Picton, Ontario, many artisans and artists have moved to the area and opened studios. In many of the local stores you can purchase local art and hand crafted products. Picton can thus be thought of as having an "artisan niche." Community leaders should try to bring together businesses that offer the same products and services and convince them to work together. By joining forces, these businesses can pool their resources to create an advertising and promotional campaign that would be beyond what they could individually afford.

For instance, in Waynesville, Ohio, there is a niche of stores that sell antique goods. These merchants have banded together to form the "Waynesville Antique and Merchant Advertising Association".   With no paid staff, they manage to spend thousands of dollars a year on advertising. A town or city's Chamber of Commerce could also engage in promoting a niche to boost tourism. Together, these organizations can communicate to customers that the downtown area offers a broad selection of a particular merchandise or service.

Several promotional strategies that have been used by various communities to promote niches include:

- Creating a specific downtown website that promotes a niche (Examples of downtown websites in Eastern Ontario are listed in Appendix B)
- Ensuring that a niche is mentioned on other websites relating to the town or city
- Creating a billboard on a major highway
- Displaying advertisements in major newspapers or magazines
- Running radio or television advertisements

Eventually, by advertising a particular niche, a city or town's downtown area can become well-known and celebrated for their niche. This will in turn attract more people to the downtown core.

APPENDIX A – POTENTIAL STAKEHOLDERS[15]

- Local political representatives
- Local ratepayers
- Downtown property owners
- Downtown business people
- Local financial institution representatives
- Chamber of Commerce and Business Improvement Association representatives
- Local government officials (e.g., municipal planner and economic development staff)
- Local school officials and youth representatives
- Senior government officials
- Urban planners
- Community service organizations
- Heritage groups
- Local architectural organizations
- Cultural groups
- Groups from religious institutions
- Horticulture clubs
- Sector associations
- Local and regional media
- General public

[15] "Organizing a Working Team," The Government of Ontario, 2005, http://www.reddi.gov.on.ca/dr_organizing.htm (Accessed April 6, 2009).

APPENDIX B – DOWNTOWN WEBSITES

Kingston
http://www.whatsonkingston.com/shopping/downtownk

Belleville
http://www.rediscoverdowntown.ca

Peterborough
http://peterboroughbia.com

Brockville
http://www.downtownbrockville.com

Napanee
http://www.town.greaternapanee.on.ca/siteengine/activepage.asp?PageID=58

Campbellford
http://www.campbellfordbia.ca

Picton
http://www.pec.on.ca/picton

Cornwall
http://www.cornwalldbia.com

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