

Information and Tools for Citizen Planners

Introduction

Downtown has traditionally been the heart of a community. It has been where people work, shop, gather to socialize, engage in civic activities, and often live. A healthy downtown has usually meant a healthy community. In recent decades, downtowns in America have suffered from the proliferation of enclosed malls, strip malls, big box retail outlets and office parks, all components of sprawl. Storefront vacancy signs and boarded up buildings are now too often the face of downtown in many communities. Instead of bringing people together downtown, in one place, development patterns now often dictate that we drive from place to place without much opportunity for gathering or socializing. Our sense of community has been diminished and our communities have lost their economic vitality. But it doesn't have to be this way.

How can your community reap the benefits of a healthy downtown? The first step involves planning.

The Importance of Having a Plan

Perhaps the best way to state the importance of having a downtown plan is to state the risks of **not** having a plan. The risks of unplanned or inadequately planned downtown development include:

1. No development activity at all.
2. Development that is either out-of scale or out-of-character with the prevailing makeup of the surrounding area.
3. Development growth that is not supported by existing infrastructure.
4. Development with no identifiable focal point.
5. The loss of tax revenue from businesses that opt to locate in more business friendly environments.
6. The loss of a community fabric created by dense and vibrant village / downtown centers.

Planning for Downtown Development

Given the risks of not having a downtown plan, the development of a plan is an important initial step when a community decides to focus on its downtown. Whether as part of the comprehensive planning process or as a separate planning process, there are several objectives to consider incorporating into a downtown plan. The primary objective is likely to be **revitalization** – bringing new life to downtown areas, including community centers and perhaps, neighborhoods. Other objectives might include the **preservation and rehabilitation** of existing

infrastructure and historic buildings; **infill / compact development** that conserves land, integrates uses and fosters a sense of place; **redevelopment** of sites that are unoccupied, run-down, or under-utilized; and/or the creation of **walkable districts** that include a mix of commercial, civic, cultural, educational and recreational uses.

As part of the planning process, an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of your downtown will help in the development of objectives. What works, what doesn't work, what would people like to see downtown, how does your downtown fit into the region – these are all questions to be asked. Answering these questions will help in the development of the plan.



Main Street, Bath (Maine Downtown Center photo)

Solicitation of community input in the long range planning of the area is, of course, an essential element in the comprehensive planning process. Engaging residents, business owners and community officials is important in identifying a unified vision for downtown growth.

Some Strategies for Downtown Planning

As mentioned above, revitalization is likely to be a key objective. Revitalization of downtown areas with existing infrastructure capacity is an economically viable concept. It makes for efficient use of land resources and capitalizes on investments in existing infrastructure. It serves to preclude costly duplication of services and use of land. When done properly, the process can result in a substantive and measurable change in the type and form of existing development in an area, transforming the community into something that benefits all residents.

Some of the regulatory tools that are likely to be an important part of any downtown plan include:

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- Zoning that encourages a mix of compatible business and commercial uses (as well as residential, institutional and open space uses);
- Transportation and Capital Improvements Plans to ensure that sufficient transportation, sewer and water network capacities exist, or will be developed adequately, in advance of the need;
- Design guidelines to integrate the proposed uses / structures with the architectural character of the existing or desired downtown neighborhood.

Other tools that will be discussed in more detail in a forthcoming educational brief include a land use analysis of the downtown area and a market analysis.



Downtown Waterville (Maine Downtown Center photo)

Proactive Business Assistance

Apart from planning, infrastructure, and regulatory measures, another key to successful downtown development and revitalization is having the resources and support available to businesses and communities through organizations and state programs focused on downtown. The **Maine Downtown Center (MDC)**, affiliated with the National Main Street Center, provides training and technical assistance (including design assistance) to communities that demonstrate a willingness and ability to revitalize their downtowns. In addition, MDC also helps communities to determine what their vision for their downtown is and how to affect that vision through sound planning and design.

The Maine Downtown Center is currently working with six communities to revitalize their downtowns and make them more attractive places for business growth and residents. Eastport, Bath, Gardiner, Norway, Saco and Waterville are all receiving training and technical assistance from the MDC over three years.

Communities wishing to learn more about MDC, its programs, and/or the downtown activities of the six Maine “Main Street Communities” can visit the MDC website at www.mdf.org/downtown or call MDC at 207-626-3117.

Maine’s **Department of Economic and Community Development** works with communities as well. Potential redevelopment funding assistance may be available through their Community Development Block Grant program. Interested communities can call (207) 287-2851.

The Benefits Of Planned Downtown Development

Downtown business development will likely regenerate interest among in-town residents and draw visitors as well. In turn, planned and orderly business growth can raise a community’s tax base because of the increased property values forged by the new demand for a downtown location.

As more and more businesses are drawn in by the new market potential, job opportunities develop, and infill residential development becomes attractive. As development pressure on the outer edges of a community begins to shrink, town costs for infrastructure and services can decline. Hence, downtown revitalization yields a positive return on the community’s investment dollar. In short, encouraging downtown business growth *is* smart growth.



Downtown Gardiner (Maine Downtown Center photo)

Additional Resources:
Maine Downtown Center
www.mdf.org/downtown
Maine Department of Economic and Community Development
<http://www.econdevmaine.com/>