

As noted earlier in the "Downtown General" section of this Master Plan, at present, there is little sense of a coordinated approach to commercial development in the Downtown Proper. This lack of comprehensive management and strategy places the Downtown Proper at a disadvantage as a major retail center when compared to the vertically structured management systems found in regional malls and other large commercial centers.

Throughout the United States, shoppers are looking to return to traditional downtown and neighborhood shopping centers, seeking an authenticity and character that simply cannot be duplicated in a mall or suburban shopping center, no matter how skillful the architects. Nonetheless, these shoppers bring with them a clearly defined retail mentality, much of it nurtured in the carefully orchestrated environments of these suburban malls and centers.

Shoppers tend to shop for two reasons: function and entertainment. To meet the first requirement, stores need to be well located, relatively easily accessible, and to provide a reasonable variety of choices. Addressing the second requirement may, however, be more than any one shop or store can do, particularly the smaller venues generally found within a downtown. This requirement can only be addressed by a coordinated effort of all the current and future stores and commercial venues.

Shops need to be well lit, pleasant to approach and move about inside. Sidewalks need to be comfortably wide and to allow window-shopping. Streets should provide continuity of buildings, interrupted only at intersections, which should be designed to be as pedestrian friendly as possible.

Two types of shopping nodes should be established, often simultaneously. In one, like stores congregate creating small "districts" with a specific character: an antique district, a gallery district, a restaurant district. The congregation of similar uses means that shoppers can spend a great deal of time in a relatively small, defined area, comparison shopping in a variety of venues, often purchasing goods or services at several different locations.

In the alternative situation, complementary stores should be located close to one another, particularly those that cater to linked uses. For example, when coming or leaving the Downtown, a shopper may look to pick up some dry cleaning, buy a thank-you card, have a prescription filled and rent a video, all in one linked trip. In between, he or she may stop to have a coffee, as well. When uses such as these are placed in close proximity to one another, such "trip chaining" tends to occur, benefiting all of the merchants involved.

The first step in coordinating such an overall vision for commercial development is to analyze the current situation. The City, working with the local business community, should engage a consultant to draw up a detailed survey of existing retail and commercial activity within the Downtown Proper. This survey should include physical analysis - overall building area; area given over to different functions; street presence; proximity; relative access to parking; etc. - as well as user surveys and questionnaires pertaining to issues such as revenue generation, peaks and valleys (daily, weekly, annually), and overall financial viability.

The results of this analysis should be tabulated to provide a general overview of the current state of commercial activities within the Downtown Proper. Then, the consultant needs to perform a void analysis, in which he or she attempts to determine what, if any, relevant uses are not found within the Downtown Proper, at present. Often, the addition of one or two key new businesses/anchors can have enormous impact in spurring both increased activity and additional development within a target area.

The third, and final, step in this project is to devise an overall development program. This would include physical activities that would relate both to new and existing stores and venues, and also to the general environment. For example, the mix of uses may be workable, but the physical environment may deter potential visitors. Parking may not be easily accessible, or it may be accessible, but not well identified. This program would also include managerial or administrative recommendations. The key distinctions between successful retail districts and ones that fail may pertain less to the actual

uses found within the districts, and more to their coordinated operation, marketing and administration.

In general, the implementation of such commercial development programs occurs through a coordinated public-private partnership, or some designated non-profit organization that is informed by both local government and members of the business community. Such an agency may already exist within the Downtown Proper, in which case it needs to be empowered with the mandate and the resources to effect the new development program. If it does not already exist, business leaders (individually or through an umbrella organization such as the Chamber of Commerce or the Downtown Business Association) must coordinate with city officials to create the appropriate entity. Funding for the initial consultant study should ideally come from a mix of public and private resources. This study, in turn, will identify potential revenue sources for proposed follow-up projects and activities.