

Downtown Revitalization



Carole Nixon

Carole is well qualified in the subject of "Downtown Revitalization"; as she is the Executive Director for Downtown Burlington B.I.A.; President, Ontario B.I.A. Association; and Director, International Downtown Association. Some of her credentials include: a Diploma in Public Administration from Niagara College and Institute of Urban Government, Queens University; and a certificate in Human Geography and Regional Planning, Nipissing University College. Carole and her family live in a century home in downtown Burlington.

What is Downtown Revitalization? It is more than bricks, park benches and ornamental light standards. It is not a program that is complete once these physical improvements have been made. Downtown Revitalization is a bit of a misnomer. Perhaps it would be better called Downtown Economic Redevelopment.

When a Business Improvement Area tackles the issue of Economic Redevelopment it considers the following;

- development/business recruitment,
- management/maintenance,
- marketing and promotion, and
- social policy.

In the view of most B.I.A.'s in Ontario, Municipal Economic Development Offices deal primarily with industrial/commercial development or recruitment. This clearly lays responsibility for Downtown Development in the hands of the B.I.A. It is therefore incumbent upon B.I.A.'s to carefully devise a

strategy for redevelopment while maintaining the integrity of the character of individual towns and cities.

It is a widely held view that having seen one shopping centre you have seen them all. In my capacity as President of the Ontario Business Improvement Area Association and Director of the International Downtown Association I travel to many downtowns both in Canada and the United States. It is my fear that we will soon discover that when we have seen one revitalized downtown we have seen them all. Critics argue that this is not a problem as people are generally only familiar with their own downtown. I submit as in the late 1980's and 1990's this is not the case. It is so very important to preserve the character and individuality of a community. This really needs to be at the forefront during strategic planning.

Downtown revitalization must encompass such things as the diversity of development in a downtown area, retail and commercial mixes, the residential component, institutional/cultural components and tourism. Many municipal economic development officers do not have as part of their mandates, the provision for residential develop-

ment. B.I.A. managers must include this extremely important component in downtown redevelopment plans. In order to successfully get people to conduct business and to work downtown, you must get people to *live* downtown. Careful attention must be paid to residential mixes and compatibility with available business experiences.

Communities are judged by the viability for their cores. Developers are attracted to municipalities that have healthy downtowns which are viewed as the heart of communities. Sometimes consideration of this important factor is overlooked in the field of economic development.

Conversely, downtown must avoid a tendency to become parochial and insular. Industrial and commercial development of non-downtown areas is vital to the health of downtowns.

Linkages between downtown, city neighbourhoods and suburbia must be established by transportation systems and services. In striving for downtown redevelopment, municipalities and B.I.A.'s must co-operate in the provision of adequate and convenient roadways, public transportation and the provision of parking. As core activity increases demand for these services becomes acute.

Downtown is everyone's neighbourhood and it belongs to everyone. Most often it is the Municipal Government, cultural and institutional centre. The B.I.A. should not be viewed as a special interest body. It is a board of the municipality and by virtue of this must enjoy a close working relationship with the municipality as it carries out its improvements on public property.

Business recruitment as we all know, is a very competitive process. B.I.A.'s in close co-operation with economic development departments must ascertain by means of a market survey which businesses are required and which can be supported. The next task is to put together a comprehensive presentation of the community. Be sure to include location, as it relates to major transportation routes, recreational and cultural opportunities, the residential alternatives and the requirements for business location in the community. Remember that business recruitment requires product knowledge along with a willingness to doggedly pursue the businesses you need. Consideration should be given to advertising in appropriate business publications, employing the help of Provincial Ministries, addresses to business and trade organizations and in short, whatever it takes to ensure success. Be prepared to knock on a hundred doors before someone answers. Once you turn that first corner, however, success will come. It is difficult to get the

first development but remember - success breeds success - others will follow.

In considering development and vacancy infilling it is absolutely essential to be careful of business placement. Downtowns, like shopping malls should be arranged in clusters. Successful downtowns have fashion districts, restaurant districts etc.

During this time of new development and business recruitment, physical improvements are probably on-going. B.I.A.'s sometimes fall into the mistaken impression that once these physical improvements are completed the task of revitalization is over.

Beware! It has only just begun! Who will be responsible for the on-going maintenance? There is nothing worse than decorative brick sidewalks with weeds sprouting between the bricks or scratched ornamental light standards.

The continued revitalization of any downtown depends on the promotion of the area to its market. Tell the world who you are, but, make sure the world you tell is your target market. If your downtown retail is upscale and trendy, advertise on radio stations and in magazines whose demographics show the appropriate readership or listenership. Promotion and marketing are on-going. Everyone knows where the Eaton Centre is in Toronto, but they still advertise extensively and they hold frequent special events and activities. Promotion is always necessary, and it lasts forever. It is, however, all in the timing. Don't be over zealous. You don't want to encourage people to come downtown to an empty pedestrian mall, for instance. Redevelop - refurbish - promote - in that order.

Centralized Retail Management

Now we are ready to develop strategies to make downtown retailing more competitive - and as a result, more successful. This strategy is called Centralized Retail Management.

"If you are going to understand retail, you had better understand malls. If you understand malls, you will understand that good retailers make successful shopping centres, not the other way around;" This observation is by John Riordan, Executive Vice-president of the International Council of Shopping Centres, and it is at the heart of the Centralized Retail Management concept, (C.R.M.).

C.R.M., draws on the management and marketing techniques that are key to the success of modern shopping malls and translates them into a strategy for downtown areas. The goal of C.R.M. is

to revitalize downtown shopping and to increase downtown's share of the regional retail market. Typically, C.R.M. involves the creation of a co-operative venture that brings together property owners and retailers to develop a co-ordinated approach to marketing, security, promotions, maintenance, street improvements, parking and leasing. C.R.M. builds on many previous achievements in downtown revitalization and offers new ideas on management of retail mix, market-based leasing, financing joint activities and agreements to create a hospitable retail environment.

The last consideration is one of great importance as we move into the 1990's. We must assume our share of the responsibility for social policy. Among many other things, the issue of day care is one of great importance both for development and service provision. The Downtown Burlington B.I.A. and the City of Burlington are presently studying the feasibility of providing a day care service for downtown employees. We believe that this step shows an appreciation for the needs and concerns of employees and their employers. This recognizes the realities of working conditions today.

Let each of us pause to consider the problems and the needs - human and otherwise - that confront our own downtown. It belongs only to us!