

# Downtown Idea Exchange

## Perspectives

### Looking ahead to 2008: Current and future downtown trends that matter most

As *Downtown Idea Exchange* looks ahead to 2008, institutionalizing downtown management at the local government level and increasing funding for downtown improvements are two of the most welcome trends that experts see.

“The best trend in downtown improvement efforts is small towns finding creative ways to broaden funding resources. Municipalities are recognizing and justifying the need for a CBD coordinator ... and more outside resources are becoming available through state and regional economic development offices. More resources are resulting in more programs. Taking care of downtown is now on the community’s radar screen,” says Robert Kunkel, Central Business District coordinator, City of Durango, CO (pop. 13,920).

“Small towns and cities are beginning to see downtown as an asset that has to be managed and have funds directed at specific projects and programs,” agrees Perspectives columnist and consultant Kent Burnes. “I think that this trend of city governments actually staffing a city department focused on down-

town is a sign that small cities finally recognize that this can not be fully achieved with all volunteers and a sparsely outfitted downtown office.”

“Whole communities are seeing the value in revitalizing downtown business districts,” agrees Nora Dukowitz, Uptown marketing manager, Town of Normal, IL (pop. 45,390). “It isn’t just the plight of the merchant’s associations anymore; it’s something that more and more people want to see succeed.”

As seen by these and other people who have contributed to the knowledge base and content of *Downtown Idea Exchange* over the past year, the following are additional key trends for downtowns over a spectrum of sizes, as we enter 2008.

• **Better attitudes toward downtown prevail.** “Probably the most important trend for downtowns is the great improvement in public, business, news media and government attitudes,” says Laurence Alexander, AICP, founder of *Downtown Idea Exchange* and *Downtown Promotion Reporter*.

“Not long ago words like ‘downtown’ and ‘urban’ were nega-

tive. Now they are increasingly positive. People like the urban lifestyle, with all that it entails. This underlies improvements in public support, developer interest and the local political will to support downtown,” he says.

• **Downtowns begin to think and work on a regional scale.**

“Overcoming provincial thinking remains a challenge. However, we are working with a number of smaller towns on regional development issues,” says Stephanie Lewry, executive director, Intown Manchester, Manchester, NH (pop. 107,000).

“If Manchester is thriving, our prosperity will help the smaller cities in our region to thrive, through housing and small business development. Their prosperity, in turn, helps us to continue to attract business and entertainment to the area and to grow our workforce.”

• **Downtowns evolve from from task to strategic orientation.**

“Downtown management organizations, and the profession of the downtown manager, are changing to meet the needs of a new world and a new constituency,” comments Jamie Licko of Progressive Urban Management Associates.

“Downtown management organizations have generally emerged in communities that have the need for

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some very specific tasks to be accomplished. Today, many downtown organizations are finding that simply being a task-oriented community group isn't enough any more. Downtown organizations, from our perspective, appear to be taking a bigger role in the community, leading the way in initiatives to develop and nurture businesses, actively participate in development with private and civic partners, and lead the way on programs and projects that go beyond anything they've done before. We see this trend increasing, as downtowns continue to renew and reinvent themselves to meet increasingly complex challenges."

• **Pro-downtown groups better coordinate their efforts.** Narrow thinking within the city limits or even downtown itself can also hurt economic development efforts, and it's something we're glad to see abating.

"The biggest change we're seeing in downtown Ann Arbor (MI, pop. 114,000), is that in the past decade we've all begun working together. This is actually a very big deal for us. Our four downtown merchant associations now regularly communicate with each other, which is something they never did 15 years ago," says Susan Pollay, executive director, Ann Arbor Downtown Development Authority.

"The suspicions and jealousies that used to stand in our way are now no longer present, which is wonderful, because we now work together to align our resources and efforts so we're working to the same end — which is a healthy, vibrant downtown and community."

• **Downtowns revamp outdated, obsolete zoning ordinances.** More and more downtowns are carefully examining their zoning ordinances. "The reason is that many are

outdated relative to the realities of today," Alexander says. "They often don't recognize the proper land and space uses to zone in, zone out or modify. This affects the ability to recruit businesses, support (or control) development and in general to permit and encourage good development and flexibility for the future.

"While use zoning is fundamental, issues of height, parking requirements and many other factors are currently damaging many downtowns. They can be changed to support a correct forward trend."

• **Downtown area populations are diversifying.** Population diversification is happening in towns and cities virtually everywhere. "In an important trend, downtowns are recognizing that they are serving diverse populations in terms of ethnicity, race, lifestyles, economics and more," Alexander says.

"This phenomenon is progressing from major metros to mid-sized cities and right down to hundreds of small towns. Downtowns can meet this trend or reject it. The wrong decision could be costly, so many downtowns are embracing diversity and more will join in."

• **Downtown leaders get smarter about development.** "In a long-term trend that is intensifying, downtowns and their parent cities are growing serious about attracting the "right" developers. And, significantly, they are getting smarter and more skilled in attracting them," Alexander observes.

"If a downtown knows what it wants, it frequently must seek developers and incentivize them to undertake the task. This trend sees local businesspeople and investors, along with public officials, getting together to figure it out. They are going to school, literally, and hitting the books. They are retaining expe-

rienced people. They are acquiring the skill and know-how to plan and manage downtown development that is good for downtown and the community."

John Paul Weesner, senior designer with Glatting Jackson Kercher Anglin, agrees, adding, "In this economic down time, many small cities are reviewing their growth [patterns] and choosing to plan and direct their future growth. I think many towns were unprepared for the housing boom and overbearing developers looking to create large projects."

"Towns are beginning to understand terms like 'design guidelines,' 'form-based code,' and 'pattern books,' and therefore putting themselves in control of what their town looks like and how it grows."

• **Downtown leadership education is becoming standardized.** A more professionalized, better trained, better paid and better understood downtown district manager is on the horizon as Rutgers University launches the first ever Certificate Program in Business District Management. "On the most basic level, we will have better-trained business district managers who expand local public management capacity. And these managers will be better paid and better understood within their communities," says Seth Grossman, executive director of the Ironbound BID, Newark, NJ (pop. 273,500).

"It's about time," continues Grossman. "Practicing professionals have felt in an awkward position of having to defend their profession with little support or resources, and communities can't seem to put a finger on exactly what business district managers do, let alone how they fit into the community or governance structure."

• **Leisure activities and value-for-dollar dining to rise.** “I think we will also see a push toward more entertainment downtown,” Burnes adds. “Not the pancake breakfast-type stuff, but the return of billiards, swing and big band dance halls, and of course the cinema in downtown. Upper story roller rinks and all kinds of entertainment along with a boom in restaurants are all happening and will continue to happen downtown.

“Baby Boomers will be eating downscale, making room for the good old-fashioned blue-plate special lunch counter for downtown. Good food at good prices will appeal to the Baby Boomer in retirement and those approaching retirement; they are still going to go out to eat, just not as pricey as when they were younger.”

• **Downtowns seek to stand**

**out with outstanding businesses.**

A number of downtowns are attracting innovative businesses that draw people by building on a downtown’s sense of place and offering products and services not found in the chain stores, observes consultant and past Perspectives columnist David Milder. “It’s not good enough to have a lot of small businesses. A viable small downtown has to have some really good ones,” he says.

• **Green is the new gold.**

**Downtowns strive to be green.**

The latest emphasis in downtown management is “to be or get green,” says Angela Fox, executive director, Crystal City Business Improvement District, Arlington, VA (pop. 189,500).

“This trend has the dual benefit of being good for the environment while attracting the young urban

professionals and companies who identify with and support this movement. The ‘green rush’ is clearly impacting the way downtowns are improving their image and their infrastructure.”

“The sustainability buzz is here to stay,” Licko says. “The generations that are emerging behind us are going to expect and demand more in the way of sustainability initiatives.”

• **Downtowns will shift back to walkability.** “Folks will always have their cars, but the places that are timeless are also walkable and tend to put the pedestrian first and the automobile second. Figuring out this transportation conundrum and achieving a common vision for growth of the town will do much for many cities in 2008,” Weesner concludes. ♦

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