

Downtown Revitalization

William E. Robertson
Department of Community Development

Many rural Missouri towns face economic and social stagnation caused by economic fluctuations in the United States and the farm crisis. This has hurt business and increased the number of empty stores in towns throughout the state.

Even before the present economic crisis, suburbanization, shopping malls and easy transportation steered business traffic to the outskirts of many communities. Consequently, many downtowns are faced with declining sales, competition from shopping malls, decaying buildings and, finally, the potential loss of the dynamic quality of the community.

Currently, there is a need to increase economic and social activity, as well as community pride, in many downtown areas. Revitalization can result in a spill-over effect, which may help revitalize other aspects of the community.

Revitalization is contagious if it occurs downtown. The sense of pride resulting from it might motivate residents to address the blight that exists in the community with renewed confidence and enthusiasm.

Downtown revitalization can be a first step in addressing broader problems that exist in rural and urban areas.

Revitalization is accomplished by helping communities:

- Develop organizations that address business, social and aesthetic decisions that have to be made if the community is to remain dynamic.
- Enhance the business practices of local merchants.
- Enhance the architecture and design of downtown areas.
- Address current promotional needs to capture potential markets available to local merchants.
- Assess business activity in the community and promote economic development.
- Develop appropriate residential units within the downtown area.
- Discover new uses for existing vacant buildings.
- Increase the employment rate of the community.

These activities cannot occur without the commitment of local residents, business people, politicians and civic organizations.

Generally, residents need to find an objective and impartial consultant to get the downtown revitalization process started. In Missouri, community development MU Extension staff members assist in forming committees and task forces to address revitalization attempts.

Components in downtown revitalization include:

- Helping citizens organize themselves to address their revitalization efforts.
- Helping citizens promote their revitalization efforts.
- Helping citizens design their downtown.
- Bringing in and enhancing downtown businesses.

As the program grows, a fifth element is brought into play: Helping citizens become involved in economic development strategies related to revitalization efforts.

These components are not sequential. They may all occur at the same time.

Communities need broad participation to ensure that the needs and aspirations of every segment of the community are considered. Business and public sector representation is required if this process is to occur effectively. When the private sector and the public sector, as well as residents, all participate and share decision-making responsibility, the results are even more impressive. Downtown revitalization cannot occur effectively without the consent, commitment and participation of all of these relevant entities.

Community developers help develop strategies to obtain the broad participation required. They also encourage the committees to discuss and consider the indirect impacts of downtown revitalization on other parts of the community. Community developers also encourage discussions about changes that may result from revitalization, such as increased traffic or increased demand for parking and security. Additional committees may have to be developed to address these secondary impacts.

Each component of the downtown revitalization process must incorporate the following steps:

- **Assessment of the situation**
It can involve gathering data through surveys, researching literature, researching media coverage and developing specific tools to obtain a thorough analysis.
- **Tentative goals and objectives**
These are the general goals and objectives that are being sought. They are what you want to do or undo. They are the general changes you would like to see occur.
- **Analysis based upon barriers, opportunities and resources**
This analysis involves setting priorities about the goals and objectives based upon their appropriateness, the resources on hand and the maximum participation to be expected. It includes discussion of opportunities available, as well as the barriers. Timeliness, commitment and impact are also variables to be considered. When this process is completed, appropriate goals and objectives are determined.
- **Establishment of realistic goals and objectives**
These are based upon the analysis. Modifications are made and additions or deletions take place. Final priorities are established and presentation occurs.
- **Action plan**
For each component of the downtown revitalization process, this step involves determining what action will take place. It outlines when it will occur, how it will occur, why it will occur and who will do it.
- **Implementation stage**
This is the actual process of making the downtown revitalization occur. Implementation can protect what exists or make changes.
- **Evaluation**
This is a diagnostic stage. It determines if the goals sought have been achieved. It also reveals the intended and unintended impacts of reaching the goals.

Downtown revitalization may cause one to conjure up visions of new stores and buildings rising from decaying downtowns. In reality, downtown revitalization is a people process. Through it, people make decisions about their community and work to make those decisions bear fruit. It is more realistic to envision downtown revitalization as a progression of decision-making steps. It involves commitment and work that finally results in a dynamic downtown.

Community development field staff are located in MU Extension centers throughout the state. They assist communities in their downtown revitalization efforts. The Department of Community Development at MU provides additional assistance to communities and to the local community development specialists. It also has resource material such as video tapes, slides, monographs and other technical references available.

To contact the Department of Community Development, call or write to Community Development, 723 Clark Hall, MU, Columbia, Mo. 65211, 573-882-8393.

Related MU Extension publications

- DM3035, Potential for Retail Trades in Rural Communities
<http://extension.missouri.edu/p/DM3035>
- DM7005, The Planning Process and People <http://extension.missouri.edu/p/DM7005>

Order publications online at <http://extension.missouri.edu/explore/shop/> or call toll-free 800-292-0969.



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