

Downtown Idea Exchange

Perspectives

Seek new strategies to preserve and protect downtown's heritage

By Dan Brown

Without the foundation of community consensus-building and good planning, rash and ill-advised ideas can take root and threaten downtown. A current example is the redevelopment plan for downtown Clarksville, TN. Clarksville now tops the list of sites that the Tennessee Preservation Trust considers endangered.

The *Clarksville Center Redevelopment and Urban Renewal Plan*, which was profiled in the October 1, 2008 issue of *Downtown Idea Exchange*, calls for controversial steps to bring back the blighted downtown.

This wrong-headed legislation enables downtown as well as a number of close-in residential areas and neighborhoods to be treated as one big redevelopment district. The law declares that downtown is blighted, and as such eligible for redevelopment activities and, if necessary, controversial land acquisition and financial incentives.

While this strategy might prove tempting for other downtowns, the Preservation Trust cautions against such rash moves. The plan is a fall-back to the flawed urban renewal plans of the 1950s and 1960s, where towns and cities essentially bulldozed large swaths of their downtowns, with the idea that they were going to reinvent them. I don't know of any urban planner that doesn't consider those efforts absolute disasters.

Oversized urban renewal projects that were implemented throughout the United States have led to downtowns that are virtually dead after 5 o'clock. They are concrete canyons that only serve a daytime function. This kind of redevelopment drained the life out of traditional downtowns and destroyed the communities' sense of ownership.

That's essentially what Clarksville is doing, trying to go back to a discredited model of downtown development. We thought we were never going to see these kinds of things again.

Other areas of concern

Two additional areas of concern with the plan are the use of Tax Increment Financing and eminent domain.

The Tennessee Preservation Trust feels that claims that Tax Increment Financing districts will pay for themselves are overstated. We support bonded TIF programs such as that in Jonesborough, TN (pop. 4,170). In this case, if the TIF-backed development doesn't produce the projected tax money, the developer has to pony up the difference.

Another redevelopment tool that can put downtown at risk if facilitated recklessly is the use of eminent domain for land assembly. Misuse of this power can threaten a historically significant downtown like Clarksville, especially without planning related to preservation and the use of historic resources for income-producing activities such as heritage tourism.

The road ahead: A better model

The Preservation Trust's biggest concern is that Clarksville's redevelopment district ordinance could serve as a model for other communities around the state and country. We fear that development-rabid mayors

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will take control of their downtowns, turn them over to developers, and wipe out historic properties that they feel are irrelevant.

On the other hand, we feel that you can have both historic preservation and economic development. You can have the Wal-Marts and keep downtown historic districts intact. But it takes a strong, focused downtown organization that is willing to seek input from many areas and to build consensus.

Leaders must seek out experts who will support their vision. There are consultants who work and travel all over the United States to advise communities on how to devise downtown development programs that are pro-preservation, sustainable, and access the potential of the local market. Talk to them, talk to the preservation community, and talk to the downtown community.

We're not against development. We think it's wonderful, and we like to see it. But a certain core of developers will always believe

that the best kind of development is redevelopment. We know that we can have it both ways. And we see examples of that from all over the State of Tennessee, where towns have integrated large-scale development very successfully, without sacrificing their historic centers and natural resources.

A prime example is Chattanooga, which recently landed what will be the first Volkswagen assembly plant in the United States. The plant is being built in an industrial park outside of downtown.

Chattanooga has great heritage tourism and national parks, and is a thoughtfully managed city. They're successfully using their natural resources, fostering a vibrant arts community, maintaining a high level of preservation, and a very high level of economic and manufacturing development.

Downtowns needn't fall back to an urban development model that's been discredited for decades, or take a heavy-handed, "Boss"

Hogg approach to anything.

That's a retrograde approach to managing an urban environment and very backward. Let's not be greedy, shortsighted, or lose our sense of the value in our downtowns' history, culture, or identity.

Likewise, your downtown's leadership should be aware of, and open to, the economic opportunities sitting right in front of you.

Talk to the local preservation community and explore the many opportunities for downtown revitalization which embrace the past while moving toward the future.

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Web Extras

To learn more about the *Clarksville Center Redevelopment and Urban Renewal Plan*, you may read the original article, which appeared in the October 1 issue of *Downtown Idea Exchange*. Visit www.DowntownDevelopment.com and click on Web Extras.