

Downtown Idea Exchange

Perspectives

Downtown housing? Not without a plan

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Since the early part of the 20th century, downtowns have been the activity centers of the community. While the type and frequency of that activity has varied over time, downtowns are now in the midst of a true renaissance. Today, downtowns are places offering a mix of uses including retail, entertainment, and office activities. Another key factor in downtown's current viability is housing.

Because downtowns provide an ideal environment for mixed-income, walkable, vibrant neighborhoods, they attract residents looking for a sense of place that can be difficult to find in a suburban setting. Moreover, rapidly changing household demographics have made downtown living attractive to the growing population of students, single professionals, and empty nesters. Downtown housing also is attractive to community leaders because it offers numerous benefits, including:

- Achieving a better jobs/housing balance;
- Reducing sprawl;

- Creating a built-in market for downtown employment, business, and entertainment;
- Improving the local tax base (property, retail, and income); and
- Providing more housing choice for residents.

While it may be no secret that downtown housing has a number of benefits and has once again become sought after, exactly how to achieve that perfect mix of housing and traditional downtown activities still remains a mystery for many communities. But this mystery need not remain unsolved. Want to add housing to the mix of your downtown? Start with a plan.

A downtown plan expresses and reinforces the value, role, and future of the downtown to the larger community. A plan not only outlines the community's vision but also sets forth an actionable, measurable strategy for turning that vision into a reality. Planning for downtown housing can take a variety of forms: element of a downtown revitalization plan, stand-alone housing plan, etc. Whatever the format, having a plan that specifically addresses downtown housing is fundamental

to creating and sustaining a mix of uses in the downtown.

Assess housing needs

The most successful plans for housing, whether for a downtown specifically or the community at large, begin with a detailed assessment of housing needs. Housing needs assessments for downtowns should focus on understanding the regional and local housing markets. Housing markets vary from region to region, city to city, and even within a city. A housing strategy that is successful in one place may be less feasible in another.

Understanding how these markets work is a critical step toward framing effective, achievable goals and strategies in the housing plan. Furthermore, understanding the market will help the community develop a downtown housing plan that capitalizes on the unique demands of those residents who tend to find downtown living most attractive.

Using the information from the needs assessment, the downtown housing strategy can be crafted as a localized response to a regional market. For instance, a downtown with a large employer such as a university or a hospital might use its plan to encourage public-private

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partnerships for implementing employer-assisted housing. Another downtown, needing to address inadequate stock and vacant parcels, may incorporate tools such as land banking or infill development into its plan and related regulations. Alternately, a downtown with ample housing stock could focus on marketing the downtown living experience through financial incentives aimed at new downtown buyers and renters.

Downtown housing must be deemed a priority if a community wants to succeed in bringing residents back downtown. The American Planning Association's (APA)

Housing Choice and Affordability initiative is identifying and examining the most innovative planning efforts for providing and preserving a diversity of housing options for every member of a community. APA's publications, research initiatives, and training opportunities are focusing on the complex intersection of planning and housing.

To help establish a foundation for housing efforts, APA's policy guide on housing provides specific policies and recommendations to help more effectively address housing needs. The goal of the guide is to ensure that communities offer

diverse and affordable housing stock for all residents regardless of age, race, or income level.

As downtowns continue their renaissance, it is time to take advantage of the energy and excitement in the community to focus on your downtown housing plan. Great communities — and great downtowns for that matter — don't just happen. Great communities and downtowns take hard work, foresight, and commitment.

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