Essential Information For Downtown Revitalization May 15, 2006

Downtown Idea Exchange

Perspectives

Long-term business leadership is key to downtown's success

By Robert W. Bivens

Charleston, WV, is a city of 51,394 residents in the heart of the Appalachian Mountains. From years of passing the city on Interstate I-64, I was impressed that it appeared to be unusually compact and active, so one day when I toured the downtown and talked with residents, I concluded that something special had been done there. Upon inquiry I learned that in the 1970s, several downtown business leaders met to determine what they could do to reverse the downward spiral that they saw threatening their downtown.

First, a large enclosed downtown mall was built, complete with sheltered parking. In 1982, they formed Charleston Renaissance Corporation to expand downtown improvement efforts. Consultants were engaged and a target program of 16 ambitious projects was conceived. The business community and local government leaders pursued these with rare determination and continuity.

The novel feature of their work was that three top business leaders led the team effort for nearly 15 years. This is no doubt a record for continuity of leadership in private-sector organizations. The Charleston Renaissance board of directors was composed of 60 top business leaders. They joined forces with city officials in a remarkable private-public partnership. Former presidents of the corporation are quick to point out that dedicated cooperation of the mayors and city officials was indispensable.

Among their adopted projects:

• Clearance and redevelopment of a badly blighted section of downtown.

• Development of a financial program of incentives in a "village district" in which businesses were required to restore historic building fronts in order to qualify for financial assistance.

• Sensing that an ill-placed Job Corps facility was an impediment to the redevelopment plan, they worked with the managers and helped relocate the Job Corps to a more fitting campus-type setting.

• An attractive riverfront park was created on the north side of the scenic Kanawha River on the southern part of downtown while at the north end a popular farmer's market was created.

• Their program of creating attractive downtown housing and bringing residents back into the city has been moderately successful.

• Overlooking the river, lovely old homes have been converted into offices for lawyers, doctors, accountants, and other professionals.

• Downtown restaurants are a vital part of their program to keep downtown alive.

The final project of their 16-part plan for downtown was construction of the stunning performing arts center and museum, which was completed in 2002. On a personal tour of this lovely facility in 2004, I saw an outstanding structure, the sparkling interior of which would do credit to New York City, Chicago, or San Francisco.

How people make it happen

Venerable Senator Robert C. Byrd has been a powerful ally who has participated in this great renaissance. The State, with its capitol in Charleston, has also

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been an active partner.

In 2002, former coal company executive (and one of the three Renaissance leaders) Jim Thomas remarked, "One of the most critical roles of the nonprofit coalition of downtown businessmen has been to provide continuity and persistent effort through inevitable political changes and changes in the dynamics of downtown. Our comprehensive 16-project program has been long term. We are in our seventeenth year and are completing our last project. However, there will be more because downtowns must be continuously nurtured and revitalized to adjust to changing economic, social, and cultural needs."

The dedication of these leaders and the cooperation of business with government has made a highly visible difference in Charleston. Downtown Charleston held together a 16-project program that extended over a two-decade period and accomplished every one of the projects. To me, that's just phenomenal. Several business leaders saw the threat of decentralization — of the exodus of business and people — and just got together and decided to do something about it.

Their good work continues to this day under the Charleston Area Alliance, a consolidated entity of the Charleston Renaissance Corporation, the Charleston Chamber of Commerce, and the Business and Industrial Development Corporation.

From my experience, it's very unusual to have business leaders who will assume that kind of a difficult role for such a long period of time. I don't know what caused their dedication, but it was that dedication of the business leadership that revitalized downtown Charleston. Of course, they worked very closely with all levels of government. But it was the business leadership of the three men who provided the continuity that you need for long-term projects like downtown revitalization.

One of the problems today is that most complex projects take a long, long time from start to finish. When you have a turnover of mayors and city councils, it's very difficult to maintain the continuity that's needed.

The key thing to learn from all this is: A strong downtown business organization can provide the continuity that you need for long-term projects.

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