

Downtown Idea Exchange

Planning

Design standards, land use, and zoning changes aim to improve downtown

Long-term thinking is critical to a downtown’s sustainable success, but politics and business often operate on short timeframes. Still, downtowns can develop tools and partnerships that will help in the long haul.

An example of how to bring together several tools for long-term planning and development comes from Tigard, OR (pop. 41,220). In the last three years, the city adopted a 20- to 30-year blueprint called the Tigard Downtown Improvement Plan, and passed an Urban Renew-

al District. Currently, the city is developing land use and design standards, and also negotiating to acquire property for a public plaza downtown.

These steps, coupled with a creative relationship with a local university architecture program, will guide the downtown toward becoming a more vibrant and pedestrian-oriented urban village.

For the new design standards, “we are using some form-based code ideas, but we’re trying to use
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Transportation

Self-service bicycles can improve downtown access, use of public transit

Self-service bicycles are a transportation option that is especially well suited to downtowns. Bikes can be ridden by people of all ages. They are relatively inexpensive to purchase and maintain. And they can be integrated with downtown’s existing public transportation infrastructure, thereby increasing access and reducing traffic.

The obvious question, then, is if it’s such a great idea, why

hasn’t it been more widely implemented? The problem is, it’s difficult to administer, fund, and maintain a program based on an honor system. Even if the public bikes are painted pink with yellow polka dots, there will be people who will be tempted to steal and repaint them. The burdensome task of keeping track of where the public bikes are, and who’s taken what, is an old problem that
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Downtown residents require certain amenities

Downtown living may be more desirable as commuting costs rise, but to take advantage of this opportunity, downtown must offer the appropriate amenities. For instance, when the owners of the only supermarket in downtown Saratoga Springs, NY (pop. 26,190), considered selling the property to a developer, citizens started a petition to save the store.

Convenience was a primary factor. According to a Saratoga Healthy Transportation Network survey, 46 percent of shoppers walked or biked to the store, 45 percent drove, and 9 percent used public transportation. Losing that supermarket would not only be a significant blow to current downtowners, but would likely hinder efforts to attract more residents.

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plus numerous salons and eateries — because of the lack of such a meeting place.

Mommy networks

Through their own social activities as well as their involvement in those of their children — car-pooling, preschool, soccer, etc. — mothers need to be networked with other parents. This need is especially strong for those who work outside of the home and rely on the networks to provide some level of care for their children. Consequently, in most communities there are strong “mommy” social networks that provide word-of-mouth communications channels.

Local “Mommy Merchants”

Over the past year, there have been increased reports about local mothers opening commercial establishments. These “mommy merchants” have many assets that give them a higher probability of success. For example, they usually bring along networks of local friends who constitute a close-in customer base and cadres of likely store apostles. They are also more likely to be attuned to local mommy needs, tastes and shopping habits. Even more, they are sometimes friends of other district “mommy merchants” and these connections provide a spine for referrals and informal cross promotions.

How to make a Mommy Niche happen

Downtown organizations need to think about how to make their districts more convenient for visitors, especially busy working mothers and /or stay-at-home moms. Thinking about physical

improvements in terms of a “convenience analysis” is the first strategy. Downtowns need to have streets that are easy to cross, public toilets available and kid-friendly parking that is easy and safe for mothers with children and strollers, short-term parking that generates lots of quick customer trips, and a reasonable distance between parking facilities to shopping and activity. Downtowns also have to cultivate relationships with their local mommy networks. This means identifying the networks and the women in them who are the opinion leaders and message transmitters. Hold focus groups with local mothers or

arrange discussion groups between downtown business operators and local moms. Finally, help potential local “mommy entrepreneurs” prepare viable business plans, find downtown locations and link them to other sources of assistance such as business schools, the SBA and state economic development agencies.

For the full report on *Cultivating the Mommy Niche*, visit www.danth.com.

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them in the context of a conventional development code. The intention is to have more of the design standards illustrated, so it will be easier for the developers to use and also communicate to the public what kind of development is desired,” says Sean Farrelly, associate planner for the City of Tigard.

“Not that we want every new building to look the same, but [we want coherency in] the qualities of buildings, such as the different roof forms and facades on commercial buildings.”

To ensure that new development is in keeping with the character of the Downtown Improvement Plan, the design standards will encourage new buildings to come up to the street, and have pedestrian-friendly, interesting facades, big

windows, awnings, and the like.

The design standards are being drafted in-house with the help of a citizen subcommittee. Once the draft is more refined, a consultant will be contracted to review them to ensure they make sense and are consistent.

The city will be contracting with another consultant to develop drawings. Feedback into this process from downtown property owners and business owners is also being sought through public forums.

University’s architecture department helps broker ideas

Tigard also has a ‘secret weapon’ in its arsenal, which is involvement of the academic community in downtown visioning.

To inform the city’s long-term

planning for downtown development, the city has been working with the University of Oregon's graduate architecture department, which has an office called the Urban Research Laboratory.

"We've been working with two professors and some students there on taking the TDIP, which is a very conceptual document, and coming up with some ideas on how the downtown could transition over the next five to 10, 10 to 20, and then 20 to 50 years, in the short-, medium-, and long-term," says Farrelly.

"Those students have been looking at the TDIP, making many visits to our downtown, doing drawings, and thinking about how the TDIP would have downtown look like in 3D. So the drawings would give people a better idea of what concepts would look like."

Hajo Neis oversees the Future Vision of Downtown Tigard project with the department's professor emeritus James Pettinari.

"We try to help people visualize the various kinds of ideas that come up, and we also work on projecting for the future, what is the vision for the downtown? Then we try to put together a project that is in accordance with all the players involved. We don't try to do something separate in terms of having our own vision," or any one individual's vision. "We try to summarize and put together the collective vision of all the major players involved," Neis says.



Web Extras

To view the Tigard Downtown Improvement Plan, draft land use and design standards, and Fanno Creek Park and Plaza Master Plan, visit www.DowntownDevelopment.com and click on Web Extras.

Design research clarifies the picture of downtown's future

In design research work, which can be an important element of long-term planning for downtown, "you listen to what people are saying, and you make drawings to explore what is actually being proposed. Then through drawings, you find out if that's actually what people mean!" says Hajo Neis, director of Portland Architecture Programs at the University of Oregon.

"You can put it into words, but then people still mean many different things when they talk about some aspect of downtown. But when you put it into a drawing, it's the old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words."

Once the drawings are made, design research evaluates and discusses the reactions that various groups of people have to them. "Then you slowly find out what they really all want," Neis says.

Work of academia enhances input from consultants

Key questions that the Future Vision of Downtown Tigard project can help answer range from transportation matters like where to locate the future Bus Rapid Transit line, to parks and recreation issues like, how should a new downtown park relate to the existing Fanno Creek?

"There are hundreds of questions, but there may be only 10 major ones," Neis says. As architects and urban designers, he adds, the university's Urban Research Laboratory addresses such questions within the context of "three-dimensional, physical structure of downtown projects. We are not in the planning business."

But it can be very beneficial to augment the work of people who are in the planning business with great minds who aren't.

For helping to inform the long-term development of downtown, the advantage of working with a university in addition to

planning and development consultants is that "in this kind of situation, you can much more closely work together with the city in a more relaxed setting. You don't have a professional relationship that defines everything at the beginning. It's a much more cooperative kind of work, because you don't have the professional pressure. We're not competing with the profession. We just do a very different kind of approach," Neis says.

Downtowns with university architecture departments among their constituents should certainly find ways to tap that intellectual resource.

"It's always a good idea to involve universities in a way that research and teaching goes together, and applies its brainpower to a practical project," Neis advises.

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