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The following is an excerpt from a conference paper by Zenia Kotval and John Mullin. The full paper is available upon request by contacting the NYCOM office.

Measuring the Effectiveness of Downtown Revitalization Strategies

by Zenia Kotval and John Mullin

Introduction

Downtowns, the traditional business centers of our communities, have survived many changes throughout the last century. Once thriving retail and civic centers, they were adversely affected by changes in mobility, retail patterns and shopping habits. Since the 1960's downtowns have seen serious competition from suburban shopping centers, malls, strip commercial areas, major discount centers and on-line and catalogue sales. Despite these changes, downtowns still play a central role in our cities today. They are the centers of our urbanized areas and still reflect the economic core and image of our cities. A healthy downtown is often synonymous with a healthy community.

Downtown revitalization is once again the priority of both the public and private sectors. This can be best noted, specially in the United States, through the resurgence of programs directly aimed at downtown revitalization efforts. These include the Main Street Program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Downtown Development Authority Program, Tax Increment Financial Acts and various local programs such as Business Improvement Districts established by city government and merchant associations.

No matter what the approach, the philosophy is based on the following eight principles:

1. Use a Comprehensive Approach
2. Incremental Changes are Worthwhile
3. Understand the Importance of Self Sufficiency and Interdependence
4. Understand the Need to Build Public/Private Partnership
5. Understand the Need to Identify and Capitalize on Existing Assets
6. Encourage and Appreciate Quality
7. Create a Positive Image and Attitude Toward Downtown
8. Revitalization Strategies Should Be Action-Oriented

With all the renewed emphasis on programs and initiatives for downtown revitalization, there is surprisingly little research that assesses the effectiveness of revitalization efforts. How do we evaluate the "health" of a downtown?

Most revitalization efforts address questions of viability, vitality, health, sustainability or some other term conveying the desired well being of the downtown. However, few have actually defined the criteria to measure this well being. The evaluation of program effectiveness often relies on the intuition of planners or city officials.

This paper attempts to define some measurable indicators of successful downtown revitalization efforts.

Developing Indicators of Success

An indicator is a measure or a set of measures that describes a complex social, economic, or physical reality. A measure is one data point that acts as a gauge to tell us how well or poorly we are doing with respect to an indicator. Measures use quantifiable data, preferably collected over time, to identify trends, and assess whether conditions are improving, staying steady or deteriorating. Measures used will change over time to reflect relevance, availability of new data and developments in society.

Criteria used to select measures include:

1. Relevance and Impact
2. Validity and Availability
3. Simplicity
4. Ability to Aggregate Information
5. Ability to Reflect Trends

Indicators to Consider

This section proposes some simple indicators which, when measured over time, could provide a good sense of the effectiveness of downtown revitalization efforts.

1. Occupancy Rates
2. Diversity of Uses
3. Improvements in Aesthetic Conditions
4. Increase in Market Capture
5. Better Connections Between the Built and Natural Environments
6. Strength in Organization of Management
7. Increasing Effects of the Internet and E-commerce

In Summary

Regardless of the evaluation tool or technique, it is important to look at downtown success in a holistic manner over a period of time. Different indicators will have varying degrees of relevancy and using the appropriate measures at the appropriate time is quite crucial. It is not surprising to find that commercial revitalization projects that have been active for longer periods of time report more dramatic changes in most indicators than newer programs. The National Trust for Historic Preservation notes that this difference is particularly noticeable in property values, upper floor occupancy, numbers of restaurants and numbers of housing units. Over time, increase in the number of retail businesses and a decline in personal service businesses on the street level are indicative of revitalization programs becoming more experienced in guiding development by intensifying ground floor retail uses and moving non-retail uses to secondary locations such as upper floors or side streets.

Maturity brings a better understanding of market performance, customer base and the unique characteristics that make a particular downtown successful.

In Conclusion

Downtowns are special places. They reflect a community's values, they provide a sense of place. Promoting the revitalization of downtown, the heart of the community, has never been more critical. At the same time, there is an increasing awareness of accountability and effectiveness of programs and funds used to revitalize our downtowns. Developing and documenting indicators of success over time will lend credibility to our efforts and the use of valuable resources.