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Off the Shelf

Downtown Planning for Smaller and Midsized Communities

By Jeff Siegler, CMSM | From Main Street Story of the Week | November-December 2010 |

Downtown Planning for Smaller and Midsized Communities, by Philip Walker, American Planning Association (2009). 228 pages.

Sometimes I forget that downtown revitalization is more than just the four-point approach, fund raisers, and parking problems. Our work is much bigger and occasionally I am reminded of the greater context of Main Street. Fortunately I had the opportunity to immerse myself in the field of urban planning by reading Philip L. Walker's *Downtown Planning for Smaller and Midsized Communities*.

This book is a concise, comprehensive look at all facets of planning for the typical Main Street community. Way too often, when working in the Main Street world, it is easy to get bogged down in the organizational challenges and community relationships; this book does a great job of forcing the reader to step back and look at the larger picture and the importance of planning in a community.

First, it is important to be clear about what exactly a downtown plan entails. Walker describes it as "a plan that holistically considers all of the basic dimensions of a downtown – physical, economic, social, and political." He also notes that a plan should address downtown management issues, including marketing, business development, and events. The author is clear that the plan is critical, but so is appointing an organization to implement the plan and manage the district. In this regard, Walker is a major proponent of Main Street programs as vehicles to get the work done and coordinate the revitalization efforts. The book even begins with a forward from Doug Loesch, director of the National Trust Main Street Center, and former Main Street program officer, Nick Kalogeresis, currently of The Lakota Group.

The book starts by explaining some of the reasons communities opt to create a downtown plan: these include the lack of a plan or a plan that is out of date, changes in the economic environment, major new developments, transportation changes, and image problems.

Creating a long-term plan for the downtown can be the difference between revitalization success and failure. The first step for the planning team is to gather the necessary background data to understand the downtown, including information about its history, physical conditions, socioeconomics, public policy, and political climate. Once this information is gathered, the team can begin developing the concept plan.

The most important aspect of the concept plan is public input. Walker points out that garnering public input is crucial to the success of any downtown plan and can often be the make-or-break factor when it comes to implementation. Involving the public is typically done through workshops, charrettes, and public presentations throughout the development of the concept plan. The greater the public's buy-in, the greater the support will be for the final plan and the greater the likelihood the plan will be implemented.

Halfway through the book, Walker delves into the content that actually goes into a downtown plan. This is the information that Main Street communities without a plan sorely need. The decisions Main Street programs make on a regular basis should always be guided by the downtown plan. Communities without downtown plans are challenged with a much harder task when they don't have a vision to guide them.

We usually only associate a downtown's physical elements with a master plan. And, it's true, comprehensive downtown plans should address streets, alleys, parking, sidewalks, trees, street furniture, public spaces, infrastructure, and pedestrian and automobile needs. But as Walker points out, the physical elements of a plan are only half of the equation. Every downtown should have a guiding vision when considering land use and balancing the needs for housing, retail and services, offices, lodging, institutional and public facilities, and entertainment and cultural facilities. The physical aspects of downtown are incredibly important to a district's long-term health, and fortunately there are a number of firms around the country able to assist in guiding design decisions when a community lacks the necessary expertise.

In addition to the physical plan, there must be an economic and marketing plan. This can often be the most difficult area for downtown organizations to understand. What is the role of a district in the marketplace and who should the district serve? Is downtown simply an office park or a retail destination? These are questions most districts grapple with and find little in the way of answers. One of the greatest missed opportunities I have observed in working with Main Street communities is a lack of identity. Too many communities allow their image to be dictated by outside concerns instead of taking the initiative to decide how they want their community perceived. Having an agreed-upon image helps guide events, promotional direction, marketing materials, and a number of other decisions that can all funnel into a consistent community image.

One of the greatest frustrations for a Main Street organization is the lack of an implementation strategy for a plan. It is also one of the greatest attributes of a Main Street organization – the ability to implement a plan. *Downtown Planning for Smaller and Midsize Communities* does an excellent job of addressing the implementation issue and often cites Main Street examples as the driver in implementing the work laid out in a downtown plan. Walker feels the public/private board structure, a designated staff person, and the use of local expertise at the committee level is the ideal strategy for carrying out the work put forth in a downtown plan.

Downtown Planning for Smaller and Midsize Communities is an excellent resource for anyone working in downtown revitalization. The book covers all of the aspects that help create a healthy downtown and a successful revitalization strategy. Readers will get a big picture view of all the components that make a downtown function and the importance of having a plan. Reading Walker's book reminded me what initially interested me about the field of downtown revitalization and urban planning. A functioning and vibrant downtown is the key to a healthy community and the quality of life of its residents. It is an incredibly complex and comprehensive proposition to revitalize a district, but with a well-organized plan, community participation, and a downtown revitalization organization, it becomes possible.

Jeff Siegler, CMSM, is the director of revitalization at Heritage Ohio and coordinates the Ohio Main Street Program. Jeff has his Masters of Urban and Regional Planning from Virginia Commonwealth University.