
THE DOWNTOWN CONNECTION

Information and Ideas for SLO County Communities

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DOWNTOWN SURVIVAL

After decades of decline, the urban center is showing signs of a surprising resurgence. But don't think that it will ever reemerge as the "geographically dominant center of its region as it was in the industrial era," predicts Joel Kotkin, senior fellow with Pepperdine University's Institute for Public Policy and research fellow in urban policy at the Reason Public Policy Institute.

Instead, says Kotkin, the new urban core should bear a stronger resemblance to the renaissance city – relatively small, and built around classical urban functions such as the arts, cross-cultural trade and highly specialized small-scale production. The hope for central business districts today lies in their ability to recover their pre-industrial roles as centers for the arts, entertainment, face-to-face trading and in providing highly specialized goods and services.

The appeal of downtowns essentially lies in their ability to provide the excitement and diversity unavailable to those in rural or countryside settings.

Downtown Must Offer a Sense of Place

Just as new suburbs often offer better schools, new infrastructure, and the rural countryside's physical beauty, the central cores of towns must offer their own unique attributes – a sense of place, of history and of meaning.

Downtown recovery involves the creation of new cultural institutions that help give the central business district its sense of place. Preserving a sense of the past has also been a critical strategy to downtown revival.

Retail is still one Key to Recovery

Along with maintaining a strong cultural base, downtowns are still finding that retail development remains another important path on the road to economic recovery. In fact, the success of many downtowns lies in their ability to build their identities by bolstering the often-neglected Main Street.

In a related strategy, downtown must also try to keep the downtown shopping central business district as authentic as possible. This type of "urban authenticity" is often reflected by the presence of individual, locally based merchants – many of whom sell products and services that are different, or at least de-

livered in a different manner, then ubiquitous chains found in prototypical suburban communities.

"Without retailing, the commercial role of the center or Main Street will have been repealed. A library, concert hall or art museum can lure visitors on special occasions, but only the marketplace can create a true permanent central place. Ultimately, a revived center city will have to combine both this community sense and a sense of uniqueness with a strong, market-driven commercial appeal."

Guidelines for Survival

To help them survive in the next century, Kotkin offers the following "reality-based" guidelines for downtowns.

1. Emphasize qualitative over quantitative values. Downtowns don't need to experience a rapid growth in population in order to be successful. Indeed, slowing or even reducing population can provide the basis for creating a more livable town.

2. Concentrate on appropriate niches. The archetypical future city must see itself, first and foremost, as a collection of cosmopolitan, functional and living neighborhoods. These communities should seek to offer residents a wide range of experiences, sights and sounds not readily accessible through a computer console or in the suburban expanse. Economy and culture should be given free reign to express its spontaneity and diversity in accordance with marketplace demands.

3. Nurture the Grassroots economy. Cities and their downtowns must incorporate a large enough share of their population into their civic and economic web. Rather than obsess on large firms or symbolic projects like stadiums; center cities need to encourage grassroots entrepreneurship, which taps the skills and energies of their own people, both as entrepreneurs and as workers.

Communities should also strive to maintain a strong presence of specialized industrial, warehousing and other blue-collar industries in addition to focusing on postindustrial sectors, such as the service industry. Even with the trend towards lower pay and less unionization in manufacturing, industrial jobs generally still pay higher than service positions; overall industrial workers remain half as likely to earn incomes below the poverty line than their service counterparts.
