

Downtown Revitalization: Some Simple Methods to Inventory and Survey your Local Downtown

Martin Shields (mshields@psu.edu)
Assistant Professor of Agricultural and Regional Economics
Dept of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology
Penn State University

Summary

Completing a downtown inventory should be one of the first steps in any downtown revitalization effort. This tool offers several low-cost inventory methods to help local revitalization programs.

Overview

Many downtowns are struggling. In quite a few places, boarded buildings and empty storefronts now dominate once prosperous streets. Seeking to reverse years of decline, a number of communities are initiating downtown revitalization programs.

Pragmatism is a foundation of successful revitalization organizations. Revitalization groups need to objectively evaluate what their downtown has been and what it is presently. Understanding downtown must go beyond anecdotes and perceptions, which can be misleading. Instead, the current resources available, the users of downtown, potential markets and competing communities must be known. Identifying '*where we are now*' is a necessary step prior to formulating plans as to what the downtown could or should be.

Early efforts should look at the community's current condition. In order to rebuild downtown, it is helpful to complete an assessment of your downtown community. The fundamental aspects of this assessment will identify:

- *Problems*. These are obstacles or constraints experienced by business owners or others in the community that make it difficult for them to succeed.
- *Assets*. These are resources that make your community attractive to businesses and individuals whom may want to move into, make investments, or visit your town.
- *Needs*. These are the requirements that sustain individual households and businesses. For instance, access to particular transportation networks or residential or business space.
- *Windows of opportunity*. These are local conditions that make it easier or possible to undertake a particular project. Consider all events, conditions, or changes in the community.

There are a number of ways in which you can capture the state of your downtown and identify potential resolutions to existing problems. This tool offers suggestions as to 1) how to develop and analyze a detailed understanding of your downtown, and 2) a means for analyzing that data. You will find that collecting and assessing this information may be time consuming, but it does not have to be costly. While consultants are well positioned to conduct such analysis, key aspects are given here to facilitate low-cost analysis. After assembling the initial database, an ongoing updating procedure should be established, implemented, and maintained.

A *Downtown Inventory* or *Survey* establishes an understanding of the present condition of downtown and provides a basis for future objective policy formulation and decision-making. Each of the inventories presented here is designed to inform business people, community leaders and other citizens of your community of the history and current status of your downtown. One of the major purposes of evaluating the current physical conditions of your downtown is to identify and document the challenges and opportunities impacting your downtown. With this understanding, your community will be in a stronger position to develop a vision for downtown and implement a strategic plan, complete with benchmark indicators. In addition to introducing tools, we provide some suggestions on actions a community might consider as it tries to enhance its retail abilities.

Method: Conducting a Downtown Inventory

An inventory survey establishes an understanding of the present condition of downtown and provides a basis for future objective policy formulation and decision-making. Key components include:

- Tracing historical development
- Knowing downtown's role in the region
- Understanding local transportation patterns and modes
- Assessing local infrastructure
- Mapping current land use and zoning
- Assessing public facilities and services
- Analyzing existing buildings
- Analyzing the streetscape

Several types of inventory surveys are possible, some more involved than others.

Walk-Through Survey

Take a long walk through your downtown and look closely at its appearance. Notice the current businesses, their types, the number and location of empty storefronts, the condition of the sidewalks and roadways, the amount of automobile or pedestrian traffic, and so forth. Using either the worksheet provided here ([LINK TO WORKSHEET WALKTHRU_INVENTORY.PDF](#)) or one

that is custom-made to suit your needs, record what you see. The downtown group can use this inventory to better understand how downtown functions.

Visual Imaging

Another way to evaluate downtown is to look at photographs. Because you can take the photographs and complete the analysis at a later time, this is a helpful method for those who are time-pressed. Take the photographs on a clear day and when the lighting is sufficient to facilitate comparison of permanent conditions and attributes. Categorize the photos by grouping them according to residential, commercial, recreational, and mixed land-use, as well as infrastructure. Dissect and record what you see.

Commercial Space Inventory

Your group may find it useful to gather a concise database of local commercial property. Initially, it can catalog the existing use of space. It will also be useful down the road when attempting to attract new businesses. Such a database should contain information about the type of industry each business belongs to. Other information you may want to include is the location of the property, occupant (business name) and contact information, owner name and contact information, and the amount of commercial space. Much of this information is freely available at real estate and town offices. Click here ([LINK TO WORKSHEET COMMSPACE_INVENTORY.PDF](#)) to see an example of a commercial space inventory.

Business and Service Inventory

Knowing which goods and services are available locally and which ones are purchased outside of the community is helpful for discovering potential growth areas. The following worksheet offers a partial list of business types, and can serve as a model for an inventory of your downtown's businesses. Develop a similar worksheet for your community, thinking about all the goods and services that people need, and where they purchase them (i.e., locally, nearby or outside the region). When a service is not available locally, think about why not (for example, the community may be too small to support such a business). Once this inventory is complete, you might have some ideas about potential new businesses for the community. Click here ([LINK TO WORKSHEET BUSINESS_AVAIL_INVENTORY.PDF](#)) to see an example of a commercial space inventory.

Method: Surveying the Public

The revitalization group can survey residents and shoppers to determine their retail needs and shopping patterns, as well as their general perceptions of the downtown. Survey information complements the inventory in determining market

gaps; identifying existing businesses that do not meet customer needs; and identifying the goods and services residents feel the area lacks.

Survey questions may focus on:

- Respondent’s preferences for new retail and service businesses.
- Current shopping habits; where, for what, how often.
- Demographic information.
- A listing of the types of shops they would like to see in the town.

Your organization can develop a comprehensive survey or one or a series of one-page surveys. If a lengthy, more detailed survey design is chosen then it is best distributed by mail or some other means that allows respondents adequate time for completion. A simple survey is best conducted in a brief (three to five minutes) face-to-face interview, which allows for clarification. Whatever format is chosen, you should target a wide audience in order to capture all demographic groups. Examples of possible data collected and simple survey designs follow.

Purchasing Survey

What goods and services do you and other residents purchase? Which of these do you purchase outside of town, where and why? Such a listing can help identify the existing support of local businesses and the goods and services that people may wish to purchase in their home community, but must acquire outside of town do to lack of selection or quality at the local level. It will also provide some indication of how far people are willing to travel to obtain the desired good or service. Click here ([LINK TO WORKSHEET PURCHASING_SURVEY.PDF](#)) to see an example.

Sample Summary of Purchasing Survey Responses

Goods and Services	<i>Where Local Wants and Needs Are Currently Met</i>			
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Locally</i>	<i>Elsewhere in the County</i>	<i>Outside of the County</i>
Apparel/Clothing	62%	6%	36%	54%
Groceries	53	5	50	27
Shoes	26	10	30	10
Restaurant – Take Out	13	14	43	43
Drug Store items	17	0	64	27
Restaurant - Sit Down	12	11	33	44
Variety Store	13	28	23	46
Music/Video	8	0	33	67
Hardware	6	80	0	20
Books/Stationery	3	0	50	0
Furniture	3	0	50	50
Auto Repair/Auto Parts	3	50	0	0
Appliances/Electronics	1	0	45	55
Department Store	1	0	100	0
Recreation/Activities	1	100	0	0

Bank	1	65	35	0
Toys/Children's Stores	1	0	0	100
Crafts Store	1	0	0	100

Perceptions Survey

It is helpful to examine peoples and businesses perceptions of downtown. Knowing how citizens and shopkeepers feel about Main Street provides insight that cannot be obtained through secondary data analysis. Surveying those who use downtown and, as importantly, those who do not use downtown, can provide a deeper understanding of public opinion. Information gleaned from these surveys can help establish priorities, reveal additional concerns and generate support and goodwill for the efforts. Information from this type of survey might include:

- Frequency and use of downtown
- Perceptions of downtown
- Reasons for not using downtown
- Desires for downtown

Unmet Needs Survey

You can ask individuals to identify the types of businesses that they want or feel that the town needs. Ask people to think about the needs that they have or those of family and friends. What kind of businesses would fulfill currently unmet needs or desires? Examples may include certain types of restaurants or business services. This information, when combined with available local resources, such as unique labor skills or available retail space, can be used to encourage new enterprises in your community.

How this Information is used in Community Development

Essentially, this effort will help to identify the best downtown revitalization options for your town. Instead of leaping from problems to fixes, with this analysis you will be able to make better-informed decisions based on opportunities that may exist right in your own backyard.

There are a number of strategies that revitalization programs can adopt to achieve their vision, ranging from small projects such as new planters and benches to large projects such as totally reconstructing Main Street. Here are a few possible activities:

Improving Downtown's Appearance. Downtown groups should try to provide an intimate and distinct character for the downtown. For instance, they may create a warm feel to the downtown by building a pedestrian friendly atmosphere or by highlighting its historic charm and architecture.

Improving Local Business Practices. Downtown merchants will improve their profits by improving their business practices. The downtown group should work closely with local retailers in helping them improve local business practices. The group may want to bring in outside retailers whose success arose because they have adopted these principles.

Developing Niches. Many formerly declining downtowns can now compete with retail giants because they have found a way to successfully co-exist. These downtowns are not flourishing from head-on competition, but rather through the establishment of distinct niches. Such places offer highly specialized businesses that are committed to exceptional customer service, qualities often lacking in large retail companies.

Historic Preservation. Preserving historic facilities is often a central component of downtown revitalization programs. Historic preservation creates a bond between a community and its citizens, stabilizes neighborhoods and creates viable business districts and effectively targets areas appropriate for public attention.

Take Advantage of Tourism. Downtown revitalization groups can work with businesses and tourism promotion agencies to seize new opportunities. Improved business practices and customer service should strengthen downtown businesses in nearly all tourist communities. The downtown group can also work with tourism agencies to better market the region. Reasonable goals include increased visitor traffic and expenditures.

Promote Downtown. Promotional image building highlights the downtown in a positive manner. Downtown organizers should create events and activities that reveal many different views and aspects of the community. Efforts should focus on developing community pride, and heightening awareness of what is distinctive about the community and its downtown.

Other Ideas. Ideas for promoting downtown are only limited by imagination. The key is to add your own touch depending on the character of the local downtown and surrounding community.

For More Information

While this tool offers fundamental suggestions for revitalization efforts, communities may be interested in alternative materials. Here are some other available training resources and networking organizations.

Pennsylvania agencies offering assistance:

Pennsylvania Main Street and Commercial Reinvestment Programs
Department of Community and Economic Development
576 Forum Building

Harrisburg, PA 17120
Phone: 717-720-7300
<http://www.dced.state.pa.us/>

The Main Street program is designed to help a community's downtown economic development effort through the establishment of a local downtown revitalization organization and management of downtown revitalization by a professional downtown coordinator. The Commercial Reinvestment program works in conjunction with the Main Street program by using business district strategies to support eligible commercial related projects located within a central business district.

Pennsylvania Downtown Center (PDC)

1230 North Third Street
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2020
Phone: 717-233-4675
<http://www.padowntown.org/>

The PDC is a statewide, non-profit organization, which advocates for the preservation and economic vitality of the Commonwealth's downtowns and business districts, and advises communities on economic development. The Pennsylvania Downtown Center is committed to helping communities through education, training, strategic partnerships, and advocacy efforts.

New York agencies offering assistance:

[ADD NEW YORK LINKS HERE]

National agencies offering assistance:

National Main Street Center

1785 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 202-673-4219
<http://www.mainst.org/>

The Main Street program is designed to improve all aspects of the downtown or central business district, producing both tangible and intangible benefits. The National Main Street Center assists states, communities and others in the revitalization of business districts within a preservation context. Delivers consultation and information services to states and communities under contract. Provides information and consultation on downtown revitalization through technical assistance, the National Main Street Network, conferences, products and Main Street Certification Institute.

Some useful written materials:

Revitalizing Downtown

Explains successful main street methodology, a comprehensive strategy to improve downtown's image and management. Contains important information on organization, promotion, design and economic restructuring, plus an extensive bibliography and useful list of organizations. Published by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Washington, DC: National Main Street Center, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Rev. 1988.