

Middletown
DART Report
August 10, 2007

The DART visit in Middletown generated good discussion about the revitalization process and how it might relate specifically to the downtown.

Middletown is a large city which has seen its share of industrial downsizing that has had a negative impact on the downtown, which is physically removed to the west of the population concentration.

Community growth trends for the 21st century are different than what was experienced during the last half of the 20th century, and cities must be prepared to look forward to changing demographics, transportation options, capitalization of land use and emerging markets.

One constant that should not be under-valued is that people want to belong to a community. If Middletown is to “survive” as a community in the next 50 years, the attitude has to focus on the positive attributes and involve a wide cross-section of the community.

Organization

Stakeholders

The most critical link to the success of the downtown revitalization, not surprisingly, is the investment of property owners. When the community steps forward to collectively “act” to revitalize the downtown, the property owners, who have the greatest financial risk at stake, need to be partners. It may be difficult for the majority owners to accept new suggestions and ideas which may appear, at first, intrusive, but the current direction is not working, and there is more at stake than short term gains.

Communications

The communications network in Middletown apparently has glitches in it. The city, as well as the public must set the expectations for successful communication; patterns and habits of the past need to be buried and a rebuilding of mutual respect needs to be established.

Promotion

Events

Middletown has gained a reputation for very successful major events happening in or near the downtown. The commitment of the International Festival is remarkable. Continuing to capitalize upon that theme, as well as the growing arts niche is a good concept.

The crowds that are coming to Middletown are impressive, who is working to make the most of those crowds to strengthen new markets for businesses and retailers in the downtown?

Retail Promotion

Why would a local citizen come downtown on a regular basis? Play on the assets you identify (the Y perhaps, etc) make a visit fulfill multiple needs. Don't expect your citizens to figure the puzzle out for themselves. Tell them directly.

Entertainment

No downtown is successful without on-going entertainment venues. The theater is a risky business; the community should determine how to work with the current owners to provide a full complement of entertainment options which will spur new nearby businesses. Support begins at home!

Economic Restructuring

Social Services

This may not be best suited for ER, but capital investment inside as well as outside downtown will be required. A broader coalition needs to be developed (regionally) to understand the social services and the accompanying inventory of Section 8 housing in or near downtown. This coalition needs to understand the problems and work with social service partners to find the best solution. This is not supporting a NIMBY response. The community as a whole must deal with solutions, because it is not going to go away. A band-aid isn't going to change things either. This is a long term on-going issue that is everyone's concern.

Social issues exist in big cities, that does not in itself eliminate tourism or new businesses, it is how those social issues are dealt with that will impact downtown. Take charge, work together, not against one another.

New Businesses

Every town wants the magic of new businesses to flood into their community. Look at the markets that exist and would complement your 'anchors.' Creative enticements that support businesses have to be institutionalized by both the city and the property owners, or those vacant buildings will remain vacant.

An artist's cooperative, a business incubator, partnering with local colleges, involvement of youth: every idea should be a new jolt to conventional thinking in the community. "Business as usual" is a thing of the past.

Design

The Main Street philosophy is based on historic preservation. To take advantage of the unique assets in your community is paramount to creating a sense of place that is distinctive. Middletown has many buildings that could be adaptively reused, but this is not unique to Middletown, developers are either home-grown or courted just as new industry might be. Tearing the old buildings down, just continues a cycle of decay. Rehabilitating –rejuvenates. City ordinances should be designed with integrity of place in mind and every incentive that can be brought to the table should be.

Parking

Commonly thought to be a “problem” in Ohio communities, Middletown has an over abundance of parking. Parking is NOT an economic development tool. It reduces the tax base and causes blight. Businesses worth visiting – in product or service- are worth walking a block or two.

Signage

Downtown Middletown is very difficult to find, though the purple signs have value, there has got to be a better, more creative, solution. The identity and values of Middletown need to be integrated into this solution. The volume and size of signs obviously isn't the solution.

Summary

Middletown has the capacity to be successful at implementing the Main Street program in their community, but the trust and support have to be behind any local effort. Money alone can not “fix” downtown. It is an issue of the people. Until the people are truly engaged in an honest effort the situation will remain stagnant.

Main Street is a template the gives structure, through training and accountability; but allows the community to maintain control of their destiny- through the development of specific work plans; a local diverse board and hiring of staff to implement the vision and mission.

Main Street is a choice Middletown can consider, what ever avenue is chosen, new thinking and partnerships must be created, endorsed and supported or the change you seek, will remain elusive.