



# Downtown Idea Exchange

Essential Information for Downtown Revitalization

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## Perspectives

### A new four-point strategy for downtown renewal

By Michael A. Burayidi, Ph.D.

The Main Street Four-Point Approach has become the mantra for cities and towns seeking to revitalize their downtowns. For many downtowns, these four strategies represent a *fait accompli* of their redevelopment efforts.

Organization, promotion, design, and economic restructuring are all necessary, but not sufficient for ensuring the health of downtowns. This is particularly the case for small-city downtowns. My research shows that communities with resilient downtowns incorporated the following four strategies in their downtown revitalization efforts:

- They have capitalized on the retirement preferences of Baby Boomers that favor downtown living;
- They have enacted programs to attract recent immigrants to their downtowns;
- They have linked their historic preservation efforts to the promotion of heritage tourism; and
- They have retained and expanded civic and cultural buildings in their downtown.

Small cities that have not embraced these four strategies in revitalizing their downtowns have languished behind. Here is why these four strategies matter for small-city downtowns.

**Attracting Baby Boomers.** From now until 2030 in the U.S., an average of 10,000

Baby Boomers per day will reach retirement age. While most of the Baby Boomers will retire in the same location, according to *U.S. News and World Report*, those who move will “no longer flock to

seniors-only retirement communities but are likely to choose walkable communities with lots of amenities, recreational opportunities, and residents from all age groups.” City leaders in resilient downtowns such as Greenville, SC, have recognized this potential and have tailored their downtown redevelopment strategies to include the provision of housing and other amenities to attract this population cohort.

Several studies also lend support to this trend. For example, University of Virginia professor William Lucy, in his recent book *Foreclosing the Dream* (2010), found a turnaround in metropolitan living preferences with a “revival of interest in cities on the part of middle-class whites.” Lucy attributed this change in preference for city living to a “fondness for older homes,” and the desire to live close to city amenities.

Similarly, the Brookings Institution’s study of *Who Lives Downtown* (Eugenie Birch,

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2005) found that the downtown population aged 45 to 64 years increased from about 17 percent in 1990 to 22 percent in 2000, an upswing by the Baby Boom generation. The AARP's study of the retirement preferences of Baby Boomers also noted that while previous generations sought communities in the traditional retirement regions that have a warmer climate, an increasing number of Baby Boomers are seeking to relocate to high-amenity regions and communities and to places that provide them with an opportunity for an active lifestyle. Baby Boomers also preferred communities with lower taxes that also have a small-town feel. Consequently, of the 15 top places identified by the AARP study, eight were small cities and towns such as Loveland/Fort Collins, CO, Greenville, SC, Montpelier, VT, Las Cruces, NM, and Rehoboth Beach, DE.

**Attracting recent immigrants.** Courting recent immigrants to downtowns is a second strategy that cities with resilient downtowns have embraced as part of their revitalization efforts. Recent immigrants are a major segment of the first-time homebuyer market — much of which is located in or near downtown neighborhoods. Small-city downtowns in particular stand to benefit from a new trend towards small-city living by immigrants. Recent immigrants to the U.S. are no longer settling exclusively in large metropolitan areas. They are now populating the countryside in predominantly rural states such as Idaho, Iowa, Maine, and North and South Dakota. Many are drawn to these small cities and towns by opportunities for farm work, and in food processing and meat packing plants that do not require fluency in English. The lower cost of living and relative peace and quiet of the countryside are forces that attract immigrants to small towns.

For example, a study by Pyong-gap Min, director of the Research Center for the Korean Community at Queens College and Chigon Kim, at Wright State College in Dayton, OH, revealed that recent Korean immigrants are moving beyond their 10 usual “gateway

cities” to start their “second lives” in smaller cities and towns. The authors attribute this shift in behavior to both the financial costs of living in large cities and “the sense of ease Koreans feel in smaller towns.”

Small towns such as Lewiston, ME, are benefitting from such immigrants in renewing their downtown. Close to a thousand Somali immigrants call downtown Lewiston home. In the 1990s Mayor Jurczynski of the City of Schenectady, NY, brought busloads of Guyanese immigrants to tour his city so he could showcase the housing potential that the city provides. These tours convinced the immigrants that small-town living offered them better prospects than life in the big city. Today Guyanese immigrants make up 10 percent of the city's population. Once desolate downtown streets in Schenectady are now bustling with people and retail activity.

**Linking historic preservation with heritage tourism.** Cities with resilient downtowns have also adopted a third strategy in their downtown revitalization efforts. They have linked historic preservation to the promotion of heritage tourism. Heritage tourism is travel geared to experiencing authentic places and activities that tell the stories of people's culture and history. These places provide tourists with the opportunity to witness *in situ* the wonders of diverse cultures. Heritage and cultural tourism are intricately linked to historic preservation. As John L. Nau, chairman of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation observed in 2004, historic preservation and heritage tourism are yoked concepts, and historic preservation is the key to unlocking the economic engine of heritage tourism.

The heritage of most cities is in their downtown. While many large cities have decimated their heritage through urban renewal projects, small-city downtowns still boast a plethora of such sites and buildings that can provide the experiences heritage tourists seek in their travels. Downtowns are the only places where buildings have meaning and where there is a sense of place. Downtowns are where a community's story is told, its cul-

ture is on display, and its history can be narrated. Small towns have an added advantage in that they provide affordable tourism destinations. Thus communities such as Nacogdoches, TX, and Apex, NC, have linked historic preservation efforts to heritage tourism and are reaping the benefits of this growing sector of the economy.

The unique heritage of downtowns, and the opportunities that downtowns offer for walking, biking, and for chance encounters are all appealing assets of small-city downtowns. And there is one more advantage to heritage tourism: People approaching retirement often travel to many interesting locations before making their minds up about the most desirable place to relocate. Thus heritage and cultural tourism can be used as a recruiting tool for attracting retiring Baby Boomers who now seek small-town living.

**Keeping downtown the center of civic and cultural life.** Finally, retaining and expanding the location of civic and cultural buildings in the downtown should be the fourth prong in downtown revitalization. For a long time, civic buildings such as courthouses, municipal offices, police stations and jails as well as newspaper offices, stadiums and ball parks, all located in or near downtown. Lately, however, such activities are facing increasing pressure to relocate to the fringe. Built at the turn of the 19th Century, many of these civic buildings have become functionally obsolete, as their size has not kept up with the volume of services that they are now required to

provide. Others are in violation of building codes because of the difficulty of retrofitting them to meet current building standards. In recognition of the potential of such buildings to help revitalize the downtowns in which they are located, visionary community and civic leaders have fought to retain their presence in the downtown. A study by the University of Wisconsin Extension, for example, found that communities with “county seats had 8.4 percent more businesses in their downtowns than comparison communities with few or no county offices downtown.”

Public buildings are a stronger and more significant presence in the downtowns of small urban communities than in large cities. Thus, ensuring the presence of these buildings in the central city contributes to the vitality of small-city downtowns. Civic buildings create foot traffic in the downtown and help support local businesses such as restaurants where the downtown workers eat, businesses related to the legal profession, and bars where downtown workers socialize in their down time. Ensuring the continuous presence of these buildings in small-city downtowns is critical to downtown renewal. Communities that capitalize on and promote such civic activity in the downtown will remain healthy.

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