

Downtown Living Forum – 5/5/06

Panelists/Organizers: Andy Breuer, Jessica Crawford, Karen Kitney, Dave Mankiewicz, Sharon Sherman, Doug Sutherland (study co-chair)

The Downtown Living Forum, held at the Syracuse Technology Garden, opened with a presentation by Karen Kitney on downtown demographics and trends in population, employment, education, housing and income. (See attached document.)

Consultants and city planners consistently stress one message above all: ***If you want to revitalize downtown, you must make the creation of new downtown housing a priority.*** Studies have shown that those who live and work in the city center spend four times more money downtown than those who just work there.

Dave Mankiewicz talked about some current downtown projects, including the new grocery store, Clinton Square, Hanover Square and Armory Square housing projects, Montgomery Street housing, and the Hotel Syracuse project, which will feature apartments and condominiums as well as hotel units. He said currently the city has 217 housing units in the works (condominiums and apartments), the most in 10 years.

He cited several recommendations from the Hyett Palma studies:

- Seek out developers
- Focus on market-rate apartments
- Infill vacant sites
- Improve building codes (done)
- Provide parking for downtown residents
- Narrow the financing gap – As rents rise, housing projects become more feasible
- Promote the downtown area

The panel presented via Power Point the results of its survey of downtown residents on what they like and dislike about downtown living. Following are some of the responses.

What downtown offers (positives):

- Convenience – To pharmacy, doctor, stores, synagogue, restaurants
- Good bus service
- Vitality, high-energy environment
- Farmer's Market
- Convenience to symphony, theater, other cultural attractions, festivals
- Great social environment
- Ability to walk everywhere

What downtown needs:

- More retail (specifically mentioned: independent bookstore, video store, greeting card store open nights and weekends, discount stores, supermarket with fresh produce and meats, general-merchandise store)
- Upscale shopping on Salina Street

- Dry cleaner
- Better security, especially foot patrols
- More greenery and trees, public spaces, better sidewalks
- A shelter for the homeless to get them off the streets
- Public toilets
- More affordable housing
- More parking – Frequently mentioned issue
- Fitness center/yoga studio
- Fewer panhandlers
- Diner open nights and weekends and soft-serve ice cream parlor
- More efforts at beautification, improved sidewalks
- Noise control when bars close
- Stores open beyond 5 p.m.
- Easier transportation

Among the comments/suggestions during the question/answer session that followed:

- Public transportation has an image problem and must improve if more people are going to use it. Trolley or rail system throughout downtown.
- Safe parking in the evening is needed. A lot of spaces are there but not available.
- Cities that have succeeded in revitalizing downtown have done so by getting rid of the automobile and becoming more pedestrian-friendly – creating pedestrian malls and public spaces, taking down expressways, ie. Portland, Oregon, was cited as a good example. Charleston, S.C., tore up a parking lot to create a park.
- Develop 300 S. Salina Street, with enclosed exterior elevators and loft living.
- Redevelopment of South Warren Street.
- Must encourage diversity – racial, socioeconomic. Great cities are diversified. Senior housing community also needed.
- Good regional transportation is important.
- Need moderate and low-cost housing along with upscale housing.
- Provide attractive student housing along connective corridor. This would bring vitality to downtown and also free up university homes currently occupied by students so they can be purchased by families, as they originally were intended. Temple University in Philadelphia has had success with this.
- Indoor multi-sport facility would provide a magnet for people.
- Delivery company and/or u-shop services would be useful.
- Need critical mass in order to tweak services (transportation, retail)

The next scheduled public session will examine “The Cool Factor” and is set for May 17 in the ballroom of the Hotel Syracuse.

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