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Partnership that can save the downtown

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Downtown is the heart of any city. It is the most valuable land in the city, with businesses, entertainment, shops, government and transportation lines competing for space. It is this competition for space which causes buildings to rise highest above the ground, and to give the downtown the distinctive skyline which identifies a Providence, Boston, and Manhattan. It is this skyline, in combination with the architecture, building layout, and general appearance, which provides a sense of surprise and discovery to city centers, and which differentiates one city center from another.

Yet different as city centers are, one from another, there is one feature common to most American downtowns—their poor health.

Throughout the country, whether one talks about a Tacoma, Little Rock, Tampa, or Providence, downtowns are in trouble, and some authorities think their future viability is not good.

But these centers of idea generation are not about to lie down and accept this dismal prognosis. On the contrary, one of the most encouraging innovations to be applied to downtown revitalization is the designation of the downtown as a special area for development.

All across the country more state legislatures are giving cities power to establish downtown development authorities for the purpose of planning, developing, and managing these city centers. Most recently, it was Michigan, adding its name to such states as Ohio, Florida, New York, Arkansas, and Illinois, all of which have passed enabling legislation for DDA formation.

Although there are variations in the degree of government participation and in the form of DDA's, there is recognition now that some organization ought to be concerned specifically with the city's most valuable piece of real estate and should be looking after its development. This attitude is quite different from the time when cities thought they could build themselves out of trouble, as with urban renewal.

In Little Rock, Arkansas, Metrocentre was established as a city commission with all encompassing powers "except declaring war and printing money", according to Bob Joblin, Executive Director. In Syracuse, New York, the Downtown Committee, relying more heavily on the private sector, subsidizes free parking, has 10 men to clean up the downtown, provides policy security, does promotion and special events, and uses money for economic development. In both cases, costs are covered by a special assessment placed on all properties in the downtown, including public buildings. Syracuse, with approximately the same population as Providence, raises \$300,000 in this manner.

Central Atlanta Progress, Inc. is the private agency which does research and planning for Atlanta's exciting downtown. The private Charles Center-Inner Harbor Management, Inc. supervises design and construction of all public facilities, negotiates land sales, and coordinates all activities of city and private development. In both cities these private organizations have a contractual arrangement with the city to do this work.

In Toledo, Ohio, the Greater Toledo Association is a private group that does planning for the downtown. In Kansas City, Missouri, the well-known Crown Center, an 85-acre private development with \$193 million already expended on this one-half finished project, makes use of "353" state legislation which allows the developer to "borrow" the power of eminent domain from the City to buy the land and to pay no taxes on new construction for the first 10 years and only 50 percent of ad valorem taxes for the next 15 years. To receive this 25-year tax abatement, the developer agrees to limit his profit to eight percent.

Throughout the nation, more states are passing legislation to establish development districts in city downtowns. In some communities the private sector has provided the leadership for downtown revival. But whether publicly or privately initiated, the experience of cities with DDA's indicates that a public-private partnership can best deal with the manifold problems of downtown revitalization.

With the many separate projects currently underway in downtown Providence, the time is ripe for such a management device to be initiated in order to orchestrate all of these activities. Providence could well set an example for the traditionally slower to change New England, where no downtown development districts exist.

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