

'Down city' has gone downhill

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There is essentially only one major downtown in this city-state of Rhode Island, and it is accessible to the entire state in less than one hour's driving time. Yet over the past 10 years the Providence downtown has been in a steady decline, with a limited selection and lowered quality of goods offered from fewer shops. The familiar names of a few years ago, such as Shepards, Gladdings, City Hall Hardware and others, no longer serve as retail focal points in the capital city's central business district (CBD).

There was a time when going "down city" meant getting dressed for an occasion (summer wear for the ladies was hats and white gloves), with a stop at the Tea Room or the theater to go along with the shopping activity. And, of course, one took the bus to get there. Needless to say, this is now a bygone era.

The change which has taken place came about because of national and societal changes, not because of some unique local situation. New patterns encompassing suburban living, working wives, fast roads, shopping malls and a host of other phenomena have altered the old ways. Perhaps most important of all is the automobile which provided a degree of flexibility, choice and speed that opened the doors to new opportunities and patterns for working, shopping and living.

With the car one can go to a shopping mall conveniently located off an interstate highway, find free and adequate parking, shop in a new and clean setting, and be comfortable with the others there. The ease of movement allows shopping at malls in Lincoln, Warwick or Swansea; and should one desire a downtown setting, the one-hour drive to Boston is fast enough to easily spend part of the day there for shopping.

The resultant impact on the Providence

CBD is readily seen by anyone going there, although some suburbanites have not been downtown in years and claim there is still no reason to go there. Recent figures detail this impact: from 1958 to 1975 the amount of retail space in the downtown dropped by approximately 40 percent, from 3 million square feet in 1958 to 1.7 million square feet in 1975. Measured in 1976 constant dollars, retail sales went from \$171 million in 1967 to less than \$100 million estimated for today. A proposed new shopping mall in nearby South Attleboro and the increasing size of the Warwick Mall will likely exacerbate this condition.

The future of downtown retailing does not look very promising unless vigorous leadership and initiative are provided for the CBD. But who is to give this leadership and what should be done?

The mayor of Pawtucket touched on this point, in a recent speech given in Newport, when he said that "government alone cannot solve our urban problems. Our economy and our environment depend on the private sector. Government should advise, encourage and prod; but cannot and must not act alone." Although he was talking of cities, the mayor's point is just as appropriate for the CBD because there is no question that the initiative for improved retailing must come from the private sector, the business community itself. The city government can do only part of the job by improving parking, paving streets, providing better security and maintenance, and making the space more comfortable and attractive.

Downtown merchants have made efforts in the past to promote and work for a better CBD, but interest and enthusiasm are difficult to sustain on a continuing basis. For this reason there have been many times when leadership and initiative have been lacking.

Downtown promotion, coordination of activities, cooperative business practices, market analysis, planning and management are full-time activities, and more cities are coming to realize this. Thus,

they are establishing downtown development and management entities to carry out such functions. These entities, usually private-public partnerships but nearly always initiated by the private sector, work effectively in Syracuse, New Orleans, Miami and a host of other cities throughout the country.

These city development authorities are simply borrowing the idea of a management entity from their competitors — the shopping malls. Mall management is what provides uniform hours for all merchants, security, maintenance, promotion and a single voice for the entire retailing community within the mall itself. This is as true for the Warwick Mall as it is for the Faneuil Hall Marketplace, and is one of the principal reasons for their success. Downtown Providence has no such organization.

A renovated Biltmore Plaza and Ocean State, in addition to other new developments soon to be a reality, will generate more people activity in the CBD. But once in the downtown will these people buy their goods there? If the downtown retailers hope to capitalize on this new market potential, they should put their efforts into establishing a downtown management entity which can provide the same services as a mall but in the unique setting of a downtown.

A downtown management authority is no guarantee of success. It will require considerable work and constant promotion to maintain and perhaps increase retailing activity in the city's heart. But to do nothing is a sure sign of more decline.

The city is moving forward in the downtown with much of its work in progress or on paper, but now the ball is in the hands of the private sector to work concurrently with the city to make retailing a more viable function of the central business district.

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