

Fixing downtown: Now the hard part

Nov. 7, 1991, will not necessarily be labeled a local day of infamy just because *Prime Time Live* chose to highlight Rhode Island, which some have called the most corrupt state in the country. But if one attended the final presentation of the Providence "charrette" earlier that evening—a summary of ideas and actions designed to revitalize the capital city's downtown—and later watched ABC's depiction of our state—one could certainly call it a day of incongruity.

The nearly three-hour presentation at Trinity Repertory Theater was an upbeat, enthusiastic and positive look at the 10-block area rimmed by Fountain Street on the north, Pine Street on the south, Dorrance Street on the east and Empire Street on the west.

Long considered the core of the central business district and traditional retail heart of downtown, this area has experienced a long decline in sales and other activity dating from the opening of the two shopping malls in Warwick in 1967 and 1970.

This is not to say that the city and its merchants haven't tried. In fact, a series of planning studies have been commissioned over the years to address these issues, but to little avail. So is this recent charrette effort and subsequent report simply destined to be just another interesting document?

If one could judge by the audience of 350 persons, the answer would have to be "no," for their response to points made was as enthusiastic as was the presentation. And if this spirit can be harnessed into plans of action, then one could say the exercise was a valued and necessary one.

The Providence charrette was directed by nationally prominent planners Andres M. Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and several developers, marketing and finance specialists. Duany and Plater-Zyberk are probably best known for their work at Seaside, Fla. The project, located just outside Pensacola in the Florida Panhandle, is a planned, 80-acre mini-new town that has received wide acclaim for its nostalgic arrangement of high density housing, together with narrow streets and picket fences. There will be 300 units when the project is finished.

This group of specialists held six meetings with downtown Providence interests, including bankers, developers, preservationists and others. There were also two public hearings, one to gather information and the other on Nov. 7 to present preliminary findings. At the end of the last meeting, Duany suggested that citizens could add further comments which he would incorporate into the final report, scheduled to be delivered to the city this month.

After four days of intensive work, Duany and his team concluded that Providence's downtown is one of the finest they have seen. Its buildings are not architecturally outstanding, but collectively they form an integral part of the historical heritage of the city and most should be saved, including the Shepard building. And, he claimed, even our streets and alleys contribute to the overall high quality of the area.

Duany felt that there were three major markets for housing in the downtown: the elderly, students and artists. Some of these groups are

already there, but inexpensive loft housing, for example, could draw more of the arts community. In time, as the downtown became more attractive for a higher-income market, then housing could be also built or converted for that audience.

Other ideas—some old and some new—suggested by Duany included moving the Travelers Aid facility to the edge of downtown where it would be less visible, using RIPTA buses to provide free downtown movement along existing bus routes, sponsoring a farmers' market at Kennedy Plaza, improving street lighting—which also would work to highlight buildings, removing some buildings that do little to enhance the area and shifting the focus of downtown activities to Westminster Street near the Grace Church.

Grace Church would become the focal point of the downtown, Duany said, because Mathewson street will become the natural route for the persons who walk into the downtown after exiting the new convention center. So that route must be an attractive and inviting one.

Another point was that improvements must be done soon, because conventioners must be impressed by what the city center has to offer. Otherwise they won't return. A successful convention business is built on repeat customers,

but will the city be ready to present its best face?

Perhaps Duany's most important statement was that no downtown has succeeded without "some type of downtown management entity." Yes, it is an old idea that has bounced around Providence for a decade. In order to compete with a shopping mall, a downtown must organize itself like the management of those malls. This means providing security, improving sales, governing hours of operation, keeping it clean and promoting it.

Duany also singled out a prevailing attitude that, he said, may be endemic to Rhode Island but is certainly true for city residents: the "complete negativism" that prevails. Of course, this may result from the current troubles in the city and state, but that negativism was here long before the RISDIC crisis and other controversies.

So now the question is, what are we going to do about these findings? Will the necessary leadership be forthcoming to improve the downtown or will the report be added to the pile of such reports that now fill the shelves of the city's Planning Department, left to die a slow death?

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