

Downtown malls: means to an end

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It has been a trying year for downtown Providence merchants. Roads that too long have been neglected are being repaired and a Westminster Mall is in the process of getting a new facelift. Dirt, dust, noise, hazardous walking and a general inconvenience have deterred potential shoppers from using downtown shops, and this is reflected in reduced sales.

Yet difficult as this time has been, there is a new mood of optimism among many retailers as they see improved accessibility into the downtown, the hope of better parking facilities with a proposed new parking garage, and a more pleasant and attractive auto restricted zone for Kennedy Plaza. Slowly, pieces of a large downtown puzzle are being assembled that will subsequently be put into place to make a more economically viable city center.

One of the major pieces of this puzzle is the currently-being-refurbished Westminster Mall. Its new name of Westminster Center will be applied to that general area between Dorrance, Empire, Washington and Weybosset Streets. This present Westminster Center project is a direct result of the federal government's job-producing Public Works Program and is funded through the Economic Development Administration. This program has also provided \$6.6 million to repave streets in the downtown and throughout the city.

There are three phases to the Westminster Center project; phase one, finished this past spring, focused on Weybosset Street with its widened sidewalks, new plantings and street furniture, all done at a cost of \$450,000; phase two, which completion has been delayed until next spring, will add a new face to the mall with brick pavements, plantings and pedestrian amenities, done at a cost of \$1.13 million; and phase three, with bids secured

to go out in December, construction to start in the spring of 1979, and completion slated for the end of that year, will concentrate on and upgrade Empire, Weybosset, Dorrance and Washington Streets; it will include streets with alleyways within that area, and Westminster Street east to the Turks Head building, with a cost set at \$2.7 million. Architectural, engineering and administrative charges of \$600,000 for the project will bring the total Westminster Center cost to \$4.9 million, all of it federal money.

Once the dust of construction in the completed center has settled, will the populace come flocking back to downtown Providence to admire the new plantings, sit on the new benches, and admire the new light standards? (Different groups have criticized the modernistic lighting and other design aspects of the project, claiming that they are not in keeping with the unique historic character of the city.)

That would be wishful thinking. We are still in the age and reality of suburban malls with their convenience, cleanliness and free parking. And while downtown retailers are working to maintain the same levels of activity, the malls surrounding our capital city are expanding to attract and handle more retail trade.

This is not to say that the \$4.9 million has been wasted. In fact, that expenditure was necessary to spruce up a decaying city center and to refurbish a mall that was a center of retailing activity when it opened 13 years ago. The mistake would be for the downtown retailers, building owners and the city to rest on their laurels and expect some type of magical turn-around in business activity without some further effort. Once the construction is completed, the work of marketing the downtown must begin.

Downtown malls, as we know them, are a relatively new phenomenon in this country, with the first one claimed by Kalamazoo, Michigan in 1957 (it has since been rehabilitated). There are currently about 130 downtown malls in the country with approximately one dozen added

each year. Many of these are nothing more than cosmetic changes to dying centers, and their likelihood of success is poor because the concept on which they are based is incorrect, i.e., the thinking that physical change alone will automatically change shopping patterns.

Downtown malls are a means to an end, not an end unto themselves, and by themselves are no guarantee of success. In conjunction with mall improvements, such as a new Westminster Center, must come improved parking, more housing for downtown residents, a variety of business tenant mix, some weather protection, better maintenance and improved security. And most important is some coordinating and management vehicle to bring these together and provide direction.

There was no such management entity when the Westminster Mall was completed, and voluntary efforts by the private sector proved inadequate. There was no city effort or joint city-private effort made to "sell" that mall area. Yet there is recognition in cities throughout the land today that downtowns and their malls need to have coordination and management if they are to have some measure of success. These cities are using downtown development entities to accomplish these ends.

The \$4.9-million federal bonanza will improve the Providence downtown, but the success of the center and the downtown will not come from improved lighting, better street furniture and other amenities to make the city center more comfortable and aesthetically pleasing; rather it will come from its economic success for, essentially, that is the rationale for mall construction. A new Westminster Center and a joint city-business management effort can be a means to this end.

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