

# Right mix for successful downtown renewal

*Chester Smolski*

SPRINGFIELD, MASS. — It is sometimes called a "big, small town." It has all the trappings of a large urban center: from outdoor concerts at the Civic Center to a Go-Go lounge; parking problems and traffic congestion, to a Worthington Street where bars and prostitutes prevail; and vacant old buildings, to new, high-rise office blocks. Sheer numbers alone in this city bring visible evidence of the activities and characteristics common to the downtowns of most large American cities.

Yet there is a small town ambience about this third largest city of New England located on the Connecticut River in the center of New England's most populous state. One gets this genuine feeling of small town America when walking the clean city streets and talking with some of its 168,000 residents.

It is also this small town strength of cooperation, of helping one another, which has brought business leaders of the community together to work on solving problems found in many old cities of the Northeast. And it is a recognition of the importance of the downtown to the economic, cultural and human vitality of the city that has prompted this leadership to concentrate its efforts in the city center. Springfield Central, Inc., (SC) is the result.

A private, non-profit organization that was founded in the 1960's as Springfield Central Business District, Inc. to combat a

decaying downtown, the organization, over time, lost its initiative and lay dormant. The closing in 1976 of Forbes & Wallace, long established and largest department store, brought festering problems of the downtown to a head, and thus Springfield Central (dropping business from the title to indicate its comprehensive rather than specialized interests) was

## *An important ingredient in this urban revitalization is an influential group committed to the city's center*

reactivated. With new and vigorous leadership, the organization, in cooperation with the city and using consultants, prepared a glossy, *Time* magazine style, impressive publication featuring the downtown, together with plans for its future development. This "It's Time for Springfield" has brought national recognition to SC and the city for the quality and imagination of this work.

The \$300,000 annual SC budget is supplied by private donations (the city's small donation allows it a voice in decisions but no control) and its staff of eight work to bring together forces for change in the downtown and to implement its plan for the future. And it should be emphasized that SC is completely independent of the chamber of commerce with its 25 employees, \$500,000 budget and strong focus on economic development.

Having no legislative powers, SC operates only through the influence of its members who represent the principal leaders in the private sector (two high school students also sit on the 37 person

board) and the excellent communication and cooperation with city authorities. The mayor's weekly Monday morning breakfast meetings, for example, include SC representatives, and here city issues are openly discussed.

It is the vigorous and articulate executive director, Carlo Marchetti who speaks of SC's role in creating a "climate for in-

vestment" and a quality downtown, both in design and in type of shop. One finds such shops in the enclosed lower levels of the Baystate West office block on Main Street. One also notices that there are no fast food hamburger outlets in the downtown, and none is encouraged to locate there. By contrast, Providence will soon have its third hamburger dispensary in its city center.

To make things happen requires a very necessary ingredient — money. To this end SC arranged a "mortgage pool" of \$27 million in which two insurance companies and 11 banks participate. These 13 organizations, by sharing risks are able to provide below market rate loans to developers who, in turn, must be willing to receive an initial, lower rate of return on their work. The final actor in this working triumvirate is the city which promises reasonable taxes on the development. Loan rates, developer profits and city taxes can be renegotiated at a future time when the project proves viable.

The results of this imaginative device show up in different projects, but especially significant is the construction and rehabilitation of approximately 1,200 housing units in the downtown, 90 percent of which are for the private market and at rents reasonable for middle income households. A 650-square-foot unit in the Milton Bradley Co. factory, currently under rehabilitation, rents for \$285 monthly, including heat. With beamed ceilings, cleaned brick walls and modern kitchens, these soon-to-be-finished 225 units just a 10-minute walk to the city center are rapidly filling with former suburbanites who find the accommodations both attractive and convenient. Importantly, the people moving into these privately built units are primarily young to middle-age professionals; far different from Providence where the only units constructed in the downtown over the past several years are subsidized housing for the elderly.

Downtown Springfield, like most other American city centers, is undergoing much exciting change, including projects of mixed use of housing and shops in rehabilitated old buildings, to planned new office-retail complexes on Main Street — part of the more than \$100 million private investment being pumped into the downtown. An important ingredient in this work is a coordinating and influential group with a commitment to the city center. Springfield Central is more than fulfilling this role, and serves as a model from which other cities could learn.

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