

Top Ten Myths of Downtown Revitalization

The June issue of *Planning* magazine featured an article by Philip L. Walker, AICP, "The Top Ten Myths of Downtown Planning," which validated several of the major initiatives and guiding principles of the JEDC as it accomplishes its mission to improve Downtown Jacksonville. The following are the "Top Ten Myths" and excerpts from the article by Mr. Walker as well as commentary by JEDC staff regarding how each myth relates to downtown development in Jacksonville.

Myth No. 1: Our downtown just needs one "big ticket" development to turn things around.

"Rarely does a 'quick fix' really repair a downtown over the long haul... Downtowns that have reversed their downward spirals... have typically done so incrementally, through numerous small steps over time."

Jacksonville has practiced this idea for decades and it shows. The historical emphasis has frequently been on vertical building development almost to the exclusion of the horizontal "pedestrian experience." Buildings and big ticket developments like convention centers may produce people but it is at the street level and in public spaces that excitement is created and people are drawn to leave their buildings. The key to transforming downtown will be found in creating a relevant and meaningful pedestrian experience throughout our downtown.

Myth No. 2: Replacing some existing buildings with parking lots will bring more shoppers downtown.

"People do not visit downtowns to park their cars... those (parking lots) fronting directly onto streets create dead spaces along the streetscape and are visually unattractive."

Parking is one of the favorite topics concerning downtown. Some people think you have too much parking, the other half thinks there is not enough. There is an abundance of parking in Downtown Jacksonville – in fact only 58 percent of all parking spaces are occupied. The problem is not inventory; it is the ease of access and knowledge of location for pedestrians to be able to better utilize parking facilities.

Myth No. 3: Our strategy for revitalizing downtown should focus on retail.

"Successful downtowns enjoy a rich mixture of diverse uses...however, a singular focus on retail is usually an ill-advised strategy... in fact, given its importance to most downtowns, housing is often the best bet of any component... residents make their downtown feel inhabited and safe thereby attracting those living outside of downtown to visit for shopping, dining, cultural events and other activities."

Retail and entertainment is part of the downtown strategy. However, a fundamental rule of real estate or business is that retail needs consumers. The Downtown Action Plan focuses on a number of strategies but retail in downtown will only succeed if sustained by a residential critical mass. The downtown initiative should stay focused on building residential product. A short-term but highly critical strategy is to establish a primary downtown consumer base utilizing the inner ring neighborhoods such as San Marco, Riverside/Avondale and Springfield.

Myth No. 4: Attractive new brick sidewalks will bring more people downtown.

"New sidewalks, as with streetscape improvements in general, are certainly useful in broadcasting a message that downtown is important to the community. As part of a comprehensive urban design strategy, they will sometimes even stimulate adjacent private

development, which can indirectly attract more people to the downtown. However, very few people visit downtowns simply to enjoy their high-quality sidewalks, so their value must always be kept in perspective."

The Downtown Action Plan strategy is very simple - the horizontal street level connections and experience are inadequate. The current downtown system lacks connectivity and must be fixed. Having aesthetically pleasing pedestrian routes would help to contribute to a lively pedestrian experience as high volume corridors of our downtown are developed. The proposed streetscape programs, like Laura Street, are merely part of an overall public spaces initiative.

Myth No. 5: Downtown needs a large national department store to compete with the suburban malls.

"National stores' numeric trade criteria for trade-area... are typically too high for all but the largest downtowns... most downtowns are better served by focusing on niche retailing that suburban malls are not filling, in addition to other uses such as offices, housing and institutions... unique, independently-owned stores are among the strongest draws for most downtowns."

Most people realize that turning back the clock and making Downtown Jacksonville a home for large national department stores is not the answer at this time. However, downtowns have proved they can be relevant to the consumer by providing a walkable, inviting environment of smaller independently-owned retailers. The developer of the St. Johns Town Center, while serving as chair of the Downtown Retail Task Force, indicated that "all I did was create a faux downtown, heck you already have one." The intimate, unique experience of downtown is what Jacksonville can build on to attract more retailers and consumers.

Myth No. 6: On-street parking should be converted to another driving lane to improve traffic flows for the benefit of downtown.

and

Myth No. 7: Existing one-way streets should be maintained for traffic flows that will benefit downtown.

"The inability of vehicles to flow quickly through its streets is not the root of downtown's problems... the conversion of on-street parking to driving lanes simply results in faster moving traffic that makes downtowns less pedestrian-friendly... for most downtowns, one-way streets prove unnecessary and even counterproductive because they encourage speeding, limit the visibility of retailers and are confusing to new visitors to downtown."

Jacksonville's past strategy for downtown was to get cars into and out of downtown as quickly as possible (a strategy that hastened the decline of downtown) and worse yet to move cars through the downtown as quickly as possible (using downtown as a pass-through route to somewhere else). Our strategy is to balance the car and the pedestrian. Whenever possible, one-way streets will get converted to two-way resulting in a number of advantages including slowing traffic and allowing for better access to parking and businesses.

Myth No. 8: Downtown special events are a waste of time and money because few dollars are spent in businesses during the events and a great deal of preparation and cleanup are required.

"In most cases, special events are more important for their long-term benefits than for their short-term gains. Special events often attract some people who rarely or never frequent downtown... a positive visitor experience during special events can reap tremendous future rewards, including word-of-mouth advertising... special events are a worthwhile form of promotion when strategically linked to the downtown's particular marketing strategies."

Events are the easiest way to transform the downtown and to build consumer support and loyalty. Special events are significant differentiators from all other suburban options as they are unique to downtown and it builds on our downtown assets.

Myth No. 9: One of downtown's primary streets should be closed to traffic and converted into a pedestrian mall.

"Pedestrian malls typically work only in downtowns that have a high resident or employee density, large volumes of tourism, or some other unique characteristic, such as an adjacent university."

A balanced approach that integrates the car and the pedestrian is the common ground that will work in Downtown Jacksonville. We have a long way to go on the balancing away from the car with equal treatment for the pedestrian (see Myth No. 4 and Myth No. 7).

Myth No. 10: Too many regulations will kill downtown's businesses.

"Well crafted and detailed codes, such as design standards for buildings and signs... can clearly elevate the quality of the built environment if used properly... A physically and aesthetically-enhanced downtown typically results in higher property values."