

Posted on Fri, Feb. 20, 2004

We still don't get it when it comes to downtown

By Bill Berlow
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Think of a city's downtown as you would a human heart.

You can eat a heart-healthy diet, not smoke and drink alcohol in moderation, but if you're a couch potato who avoids exercise like the plague, you'll still not be in tip-top shape.

In terms of economic health, Tallahassee's downtown is like that couch potato.

Community leaders are on record as saying that a vibrant, hip downtown with a mix of commercial and residential options is key to new investment and more jobs in Leon County. It says so right there in the Comprehensive Plan, which guides growth in the city and county.

A few of those leaders and many other citizens apparently still don't get the point, though. To pump up our local economy, we need to put downtown on a regular exercise program - to stop saying that while we know the doctor's right, we just can't find 30 minutes a day to work up a good sweat.

City and county commissioners are grudgingly trying to get past their differences on creation of a Community Redevelopment Agency to help finance downtown redevelopment. It remains to be seen whether they'll be able to find common ground, or if Leon's legislative delegation or a judge will have to step in.

It's a matter of opinion whether downtown Tallahassee meets the legal definition of "blight," as the state CRA law requires. One doesn't need a law degree, however, to realize that downtown meets the definition of "embarrassing" compared to those in communities on the move. For a medium-sized capital city with two universities and aspirations of greatness, Tallahassee's downtown is a joke.

But this isn't funny, folks. A lackluster downtown hurts every taxpayer in Leon County - including even people in unincorporated rural areas who'd just as soon never make the drive.

How? A downtown that's really exciting attracts new investment and new jobs. Workers who tend to be younger and well-educated are more likely to want to live in a community where downtown is alive 18 hours a day.

That "creative class" is likely to be employed in occupations that are knowledge-based and pay well, precisely the kind of jobs we'd like to create more of in Leon County.

Call them "holty-toity" or what you will, but members of that creative class disproportionately support a local economy, not only with their cash, but also their ideas. The cross-fertilization of knowledge breeds innovation, which spawns revenue. Cool downtowns attract those creative creatures, and even help stimulate them.

If we succeed, the countywide tax base is broadened, there's more money for public services, and everybody wins.

In fairness, our downtown has made some strides. Kleman Plaza is lovely, and three condominium projects are in the works. But with the exception of special events, it's mostly an oversized office park that serves the needs of government.

When was the last time you brought a first-time Tallahassee visitor downtown to show him or her what a great city you live in?

But judging from the results of a recent Kerr & Downs survey done for the *Tallahassee Democrat*, many citizens still think of downtown as not critical to them.

Acknowledging differences of opinion about the best strategy for turning downtown around, how does one explain these discouraging responses from 536 people who were polled?

- While 79 percent agree that downtown is lifeless after 6 p.m., 55 percent attach little importance to creating an 18-hour downtown.
- Forty-four percent oppose spending more local tax dollars to make it an 18-hour hot spot - although 48 percent said they support using part of their property taxes for downtown development.
- Thirty-eight percent said downtown is "doing just fine" without any special tax assistance.

Polls aren't always the final, authoritative word, and I hope this one isn't. Because if so many really think downtown's just fine, let's quit talking right now about making it an exciting place to shop, work and live.

If that's the case, let's quit the rhetoric about greatness downtown or anywhere else in Leon County.

Contact Bill Berlow at (850) 599-2377 or bberlow@tallahassee.com.