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## Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Key Elements of Successful Downtowns

By CED Program Interns & Students

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Having a vibrant downtown or town center can have numerous

benefits for a community. Aside from creating a “sense of place” and a node of commercial and cultural activity, research shows that businesses prefer locating in downtowns or walkable “live-work-play” communities due to advantages in attracting and retaining workers, developing creative collaboration, creating desirable brand identity and corporate culture, and positioning the business within close proximity to customers and business partners. Additionally, evidence suggests that town center residential apartments can attract young professionals, who prefer walkable, urban settings.

Downtowns can take on different forms: traditional downtown pedestrian corridors akin to Chapel Hill’s Franklin Street, or town centers like the famous Reston Town Center, in Reston, Virginia. However, successful downtowns and town centers share common attributes. This post, however, will highlight several of the key elements that experts agree, and examples demonstrate, are shared characteristics of successful downtowns.

Successful Downtowns have:

- **A “Critical Mass” of Businesses:** Successful Downtowns have a critical mass of businesses. Specifically, this critical mass needs to include a mix of places that sell food, such as coffee shops, bistros, and sit-down restaurants, etc.; at least two destination retail shops that serve as anchors to draw non-local customers; and multiple places open after 6 p.m. such as entertainment venues, bars, and evening dining options.
- **A Mix of Uses:** Successful Downtowns have a mix of uses, which could include retail, office, residential, hospitality, entertainment and events spaces. These uses do not necessarily have to be vertically integrated (within the same structure), but they must be integrated within the downtown or within close walking distances of one another. The mixture of different types of uses within a downtown helps to sustain activity during the day and the evening.
- **An Evening/Night Life:** Successful downtowns have life after 5 p.m. Research suggests that 70% of consumer spending takes place after 6 p.m. Furthermore, conferences and conventions choose locations where there is activity after meetings have concluded. This evening and night activity could stem from entertainment anchors like movie theaters, performing arts centers, or pubs, which serve as economic drivers and extend the life of the downtown.
- **A Residential Base:** Successful downtowns have a residential base within the downtown (or within close walking distance) that supports and drives the commercial and retail sectors. The residential component of downtowns fosters a sense of community and supplies a steady stream of traffic and potential customers to downtown businesses.
- **Parking Options:** Successful downtowns have parking available, including all-day and extended-hour parking



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options. Notably, the parking solutions do not necessarily need to be free options, but they must be reasonably priced. Limitations in parking, such as two-hour time limits restrict consumer spending.

- **Gathering Spaces:** Successful downtowns have gathering spaces for special events, farmers markets, summer concerts, outdoor movies, etc. Gathering spaces can also include open markets, interactive water features, parks and amphitheaters. These public spaces help foster the sense of community that makes downtowns loved by their citizenry.
- **Walkable Pedestrian Thoroughfares:** Successful downtowns are safe and comfortable for pedestrians. Specifically, pedestrians enjoy open air spaces that have a sense of “enclosure” that is maintained through clear perimeters of the space (such as high walls or storefronts). Design elements such as narrow streets, wide sidewalks, street trees, decorative crosswalks, and other features can help to create a comfortable environment for pedestrians. Successful downtowns also often have public art, engaging storefronts, attractive landscaping and other amenities that improve the walkability and enjoyment of downtown areas.

Importantly, these shared features of successful downtowns do not constitute an exhaustive list of the characteristics that create thriving downtowns. However, the list offers insight to local governments who seek to find ways to make their own downtowns more attractive and vibrant, and these previous blog posts feature the development tools available to them.

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