

Chapter 11: Historic Downtown



Introduction

A downtown, or traditional commercial district, is the most visible indicator of community pride, along with its economic and social health. It is either an asset or a liability in the effort to recruit new residents, new businesses and industries, retirees, tourists, and others to your community and to retain those you already have. Quality of life is what separates successful cities and towns from declining communities in the new millennium. The City's downtown or neighborhood commercial district is the visual representation for your community's heritage. The architecture of your commercial district is a physical expression of your community's history. The Community Revitalization approach encourages forward-thinking economic development in an historic preservation context so this community asset and legacy can be passed on to future generations.

Communities across America are searching for ways to improve their local economies, enhance their quality of life and revitalize their neighborhoods while preserving their cultural and natural heritage. Historic preservation and heritage tourism are two prominent economic and community development strategies to accomplish these objectives.

Heritage tourism is an economic development tool designed to attract visitors to an area based on the unique aspects of the locality's history, landscape and culture. This not only boosts regional and local pride but is also a good source of revenue for a community and creates jobs. Historic preservation is a tool for preserving a historic place, incubating small businesses, revitalizing downtowns, generating local jobs, and creating improvements in a community

The City of Lincoln has a rich and diverse history. Organized efforts to preserve locally significant historic and cultural resources would allow the City to recognize and protect its past, while simultaneously planning for future development and growth. Preservation planning, or a lack thereof, can have a significant impact not only on aesthetic appearance, but on the unique sense of place created by a community's historic areas.

Why is Downtown Lincoln Important?

1. **Downtown districts are historically prominent employment centers.** Even the smallest commercial district can employ hundreds of people.

2. **The downtown district is a reflection of community** image, pride, prosperity, and level of investment — critical factors in business retention and recruitment efforts.
3. **Downtowns represent a significant portion of a community's tax base.** If the district declines, property values drop, placing more of a tax burden on other parts of town.
4. **Traditional commercial districts are an ideal location for independent businesses,** which in turn:
 - Keeps profits in town with local owners
 - Supports other local businesses and services
 - Supports local families with family-owned businesses
 - Supports local community projects
 - Provides a stable economic foundation with direct ties to the community



5. **Downtown is the historic core of the community.** Its buildings embody the community's past and its visual identity.
6. **A vital downtown area reduces sprawl** by concentrating business in one area and uses community resources wisely, such as existing infrastructure, tax dollars, and land.
7. **A healthy downtown core protects property values** in surrounding residential neighborhoods.
8. **The district is a government center** where city hall, municipal buildings, the courthouse, and/or post office are located. It often is an important service center as well for finding attorneys, insurance offices, financial institutions and other important services.

9. **Downtown provides an important civic forum, where members of the community can congregate.** Special events and celebrations held downtown reinforce intangible sense of community.
10. **Downtown represents a huge public and private investment.** Imagine how much it would cost to re-create all of the buildings and public infrastructure in Lincoln's downtown.

The Historic Downtown will never be the same type of commercial it was in the earlier history of Lincoln. It can, however, become a focal point in the community as the entertainment or civic (ceremonial) center of the community. The development of the Blue Eye Fishing Trial, Music on the Magnolia, tree lightings and other similar activities bring a breath of fresh air to this area. The City needs to become partners with developers and current property owners to revitalize the downtown by encouraging "mixed uses" and renovation of existing buildings. Creation of a Downtown Redevelopment Authority or an independent organization (non-profit) would help to attract unique retailers and other businesses to historic downtown. This organization could also encourage the creation or expansion of new business and residential development in this distinctive Lincoln neighborhood, which celebrates the City's past while embracing the principals of the Comprehensive Plan.

During discussions on the goals and guidelines adopted as part of this document, the concept of creating a "Design Review Board" was discussed to support the redevelopment efforts of the Historic Downtown. Generally speaking, a Design Review Board (DRB) is comprised of design professionals who would be appointed by the City Council. DRB members would provide advice on whether new development projects were compatible with surrounding uses, determine whether new projects meet the criteria outlined in the Comprehensive Plan and advise the Council on most exterior designs or changes to existing buildings. Applications would also be evaluated based on the design policies and criteria established by the Zoning Ordinance with the goal of having new projects harmonize with the natural environment and surrounding area. The DRB Board would have an advisory role with final permit decisions would be made by the Planning Commission or City Council, depending on the complexity of the project and requirements of regulatory documents.

Other ideas and concepts for Historic Downtown presented were:

- Development of a railroad heritage event: Multiple day annual festival celebrating railroad heritage on Lincoln
- Railroad developmental design theme: Playground equipment, street lights, street furnishings
- Development of a new non-profit or public board to oversee revitalization and promote private/public partnerships
- Development of a Downtown Lincoln Action Plan to address redevelopment potentials
- Move, rehabilitate or reconstruct the railroad depot at a more prominent location

- Encourage the development of all City own property west of Magnolia to Honda's gate and other locations within the downtown area as mixed use retail, office and residential.

In the future, the plan should be for Historic Downtown Lincoln to be a vital district enlivened by additional residents, employees, shoppers, tourists, and other visitors from the City, the surrounding region, and beyond. This part of the City should be the cultural hub for the community, offering unique attractions such as the Blue Eye Fishing Trail, Music on Magnolia and other performing arts venues, as well as the Community Farmer's Market, and possibly a Railroad History Museum and theme development. Complementing these attractions will be a variety of restaurants and retail shops, with other destinations in key locations. The history of Lincoln will be woven into all aspects of downtown, embracing the old Railroad Station, architecture, interpretive markers and signage along the Blue Eye Creek, and gateways into downtown. New residences to the south and throughout downtown will provide critical mass that complements the surrounding historic neighborhoods.

Goals

The Historic Downtown Committee identified three primary goals for inclusion in the City's Comprehensive Plan. Along with these goals have been provided recommended action items for which the City will need to formulate policies and programs to carry out.

- DH-1. Recognize the need for new commercial growth primarily concentrated in Downtown Lincoln by utilizing sound land use planning principles.
 - a. Develop a Downtown Development Organization
 - b. Provide for special funding to assist property owners
- DH-2. Encourage the revitalize of Historic Downtown Lincoln as a hub for civic, festive and commercial activity.
 - a. Promote and market special events (annual/periodically) in the downtown area
 - b. A redevelopment plan should be prepared to guide the future development of Downtown : This plan should evaluate and make recommendations in the following areas: market strategy, land use, traffic circulation, building location and obsolescence, architecture, landscaping, on-site circulation, signage and entry treatments.
 - c. Develop marketing tools to promote actives
- DH-3. Celebrate the City's heritage and preserve and protect its historic resources as essential elements of the City's economic health, aesthetic character, and sense of place.

- a. Development of Facade Guidelines
- b.** Establish and seek funding from both private and public sources

2nd DRAFT