

TOWN CENTER NEWS

Fall 2012

A quarterly newsletter on revitalization
and economic development in
Montgomery County's traditional towns



VIBRANT RETAIL STREETS

Why are some downtown retail streets vibrant while others struggle? What factors make a difference in how a downtown performs? In early September, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission held a conference designed to answer these questions. One speaker, Heather Arnold from Streetsense, provided an excellent overview of her firm's analysis of these issues.

Heather and her team began by analyzing 16 successful downtown shopping streets; ten of these were small-scale, while six were regional destinations. They examined a wide range of possible causes of success and determined that eight key factors were most important. Each of these is listed below in order of importance.

Managed

Like a mall or shopping center, downtown retail districts should be managed to have common hours, unified marketing, coordinated special events, shared customers, and a common business voice. Ideally, the downtown will have a Business Improvement District, which is the strongest type of management available. Alternatives include a Main Street Program or a Merchant's Association. In some places, one person controls many of the properties, and this person, in effect, manages much of the downtown.



The farmers market in Lansdale brings in customers and visitors.

Retail Appropriate

To be successful, a downtown must have a location that is appropriate for retail. If a downtown has more than 10% of storefronts in non-retail uses or has a vacancy rate over 20%, it is

not as retail appropriate as it should be. What do retailers want? First, they need a good market based on population totals, density, and income.

Second, any proposed site must be accessible and visible while having all utilities and meeting local regulations. An ideal retail space has a height of 14 feet, width of 20 feet (or 20-25 foot bays), and depth of 45 to 90 feet.



Restaurants draw from a larger area than neighborhood service stores.

Mixed Retail

Not only must the downtown be an appropriate place for retail, it must also have a retail mix that meets local market characteristics. Neighborhood goods and services are targeted at smaller populations and can succeed with lower incomes and educational levels. Food and beverages generally need more people and income to be

successful. General merchandise, apparel, and furnishing stores generally need to draw from an even larger and more prosperous area.

Safe

Downtowns must be seen as safe places, and petty crime can have a big impact on this perception. Places with buildings between two and six stories, active uses on upper floors, low vacancies, moderate income discrepancies, good lighting, well-designed storefronts, little graffiti, and well-maintained public areas will be perceived as safer.

Championed

Successful downtowns are places that are championed. People should be advocating for these places, and there needs to be visible evidence of public interest and investment in the downtown.



Downtowns provide a center for community events.

For additional information, contact the Montgomery County Planning Commission at 610-278-3723 or visit www.planning.montcopa.org

Anchored

Downtowns should have clear civic, cultural, and other anchors to attract customers and visitors.

Walkable

Retail areas with many smaller stores need to be walkable, so customers can easily get from one store to the next. Safe sidewalks and crosswalks help this walkability.

Unified

The retail core should be unified, with a clear beginning and end and as few breaks in the middle as possible.

Downtown shopping streets that meet these eight criteria will have a much greater chance for success than those that don't. For more information about these criteria, go to www.vibrantstreets.com.



This outdoor festival in Ambler helps market the town's businesses.



check-out what's happening!

“Parklets” are taking the Philadelphia area by storm. Parklets – not quite big enough to be considered a park – are temporary seating platforms that give people a space to take in an area's lively streetscape, enjoy a cup of coffee or a snack, or sit down for a chat with a friend. These wooden platforms are placed on the street, taking up a parking spot or two during warm weather months, and are furnished with café tables and chairs for all to enjoy.



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