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What Downtown Needs to Get Going

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What downtown needs to get going

The mayor of Providence wasted little time in responding to the ideas presented by Andres Duany and his team of experts in the recent Providence charrette. He appointed a task force consisting of nine subcommittees which have been studying the ideas suggested in Duany's preliminary report.

Duany will present his final report on March 4 at Brown University. By then, the task force will have completed some of its work, examining such issues as retailing, housing and vacant buildings. But one of the most important issues to be examined will be the possibility of establishing a downtown management entity in Providence. The study of this issue has been delayed until the other topics fall into place.

This could very well be the single most important issue in the entire study. Duany is well aware of its importance, for in his presentation at the end of the four-day charrette he said, "No downtown has succeeded without some type of downtown management entity."

Such an entity is called a Downtown Development Authority, or DDA. The powers given to such an authority may vary widely among the states. Usually, it is some type of public-private

operation whose powers may include land assembly, construction, management, financing, the power to use eminent domain and the ability to levy assessments in the downtown district. Or, its powers may be simply to create an environment that fosters increased sales for downtown merchants.

One-stop service center

Perhaps one of the major advantages of a DDA, assuming it has legislated powers, is the ability to serve as a one-stop servicing center for developers. It would provide information on such matters as the permits needed, and the availability of local and state tax breaks.

By contrast, consider what a prospective developer encounters when approaching Providence's downtown. He or she has to contend with the Providence Historic District Commission, which has authority in several parts of downtown; the Providence Co., which seeks to encourage housing development; the Providence Foundation, which works for such development; the Downtown Providence Improvement Association, which cleans and beautifies the downtown; the city Department of Planning and

Development, which plans it; the Zoning Board, which determines where building will take place; the building inspector, who rules on materials and site conditions; and finally, the mayor's office.

Then there's the Providence Preservation Society and the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce. If an arts district is established in the downtown, there would be another organization that developers must contact. A DDA would, depending on the powers that are prescribed for it, serve as a clearinghouse for all such organizations. And in places like Miami and Orlando, this is what they do.

Who will lead?

In addition to determining exactly what functions will be necessary for a Providence DDA, there is also the important matter of deciding who will take the lead. Will the private sector do this on its own, or will the public sector be given these duties? Or will there be a public-private effort to invigorate the city center?

There is no one best model. One has to consider what needs to be done, the resources and people available, and who can best do the job. The private Central Atlanta Progress does the planning and promotion for the downtown. A quasi-public DDA operates in Syracuse, N.Y., and in many cities in Florida. Public authorities, often having very limited powers, operate in Charlestown, S.C., and Springfield, Ill.

This writer's experience, based on research done with about 20 of these entities, is that the public-private organization appears to work best. Private organizations claim that often they have little clout and their function is just advisory. Public organizations say that bureaucracy and politics quickly get in the way of bringing about effective organization and change. Again, each community has to assess its own resources, goals, people and leadership. This is what Providence needs to do.

A further complication in Providence is the role to be played by the new downtown—the Capital Center—and the old. Will management for the entire downtown come from the proposed Providence Place shopping mall? Will the proposed mall operate on its own and leave the old downtown to fend for itself? Or will the old downtown be given the authority to move quickly and establish a DDA, and have all the pieces in place when and if Providence Place is built?

DDA needed soon

In any case, a DDA would need to be in place soon, to get ready for the opening of the convention center and the large numbers of visitors who will be coming to Providence.

It was only a decade ago that the idea of DDA was investigated for Providence, but the idea fell through. In the meantime, the city center has lost business, taken on a more depressed appearance and faces an even greater challenge from the numerous shopping malls that surround it. And some of these malls have the potential to become "edge cities," as Joel Garreau describes these newly emerging centers in his book, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*.

The road ahead for the Providence downtown is destined to be a rocky one, but this is not to say that it is impossible.

Given the leadership and the determination that has been exhibited at times in the past, the walkable and historic downtown—imbued with a strong sense of architecture and character—can become a viable and exciting city center. That should be the goal for the opening of the convention center. A DDA can be the means to make this happen.

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