

3.0 DOWNTOWN IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY

3.1 Introduction

Downtown Oneonta can be characterized as a compact, urban environment surrounded by a rural landscape. Located at the foot of the Catskill Mountains, Oneonta's downtown serves the approximately 14,000 inhabitants who live and work in the City. The population which the downtown area serves is comprised of students and faculty from both Hartwick College and SUNY Oneonta. In addition, the City of Oneonta functions as the urban center for Otsego, Delaware and Schoharie Counties.

Downtown USA has been the focus of serious attention since the 1960's when suburban malls began to proliferate and dominate the retail landscape of America. Major social, economic and political forces have significantly impacted downtown areas, with the result that downtowns today are very different from those of yesterday. Such changes have had an enormous impact on the appearance and economic function of downtowns, regardless of the size of the community. These changes, in turn, have compelled some communities to take action to preserve the historical vestiges of downtown, while accommodating the present social and economic needs of residents.

Throughout many communities, there is an awareness that a downtown's functional nature is integral to defining the identity of the entire community. The term functional downtown refers to a strong local economy and incorporates features such as the following:

- a. Insuring profitable local businesses
- b. Sustaining high local ownership capacity
- c. Encouraging strong local capital investment
- d. Cultivating strong local consumer support
- e. Keeping local consumer spending within the local economy

A viable, functional downtown dictates the social, economic, political and cultural achievements of a community and collectively these achievements define community identity. A functional downtown determines the identity of a community in a number of ways. These include the following:

- a. Downtown symbolically represents the city or municipality in which it resides
- b. Downtown is a focus of the financial, government, business, entertainment and cultural institutions of the local municipality.
- c. Downtown is publicly owned and thus represents the investments of citizens representing all economic, social and political strata of the local community.
- d. Downtown shapes the lasting impressions of visitors and tourists.
- e. Downtown symbolizes community history, often through its architecture.
- f. Citizens use downtown to express themselves through parades, festivals, demonstrations, political rallies, and celebrations.

A viable, functional downtown is important in sustaining a strong local economy, promoting a positive

community identity, and thus, insuring a good quality of life for the citizenry. There is also a sound economic reason for reinvesting in the future of downtown. This reason is based on the premise that it has been purchased by previous generations. Downtown's buildings, streets and infrastructure were built by previous generations and constitute an investment worth building on and protecting.

3.2 Downtown Revitalization Myths

Downtown revitalization has been underway throughout the nation for well over twenty years. Given the breadth of experience, there is a wealth of knowledge that can be used to dispel common myths about downtown revitalization. In an article entitled, "Downtown Revitalization Myths", by Dolores P. Palma of Hyatt-Palma, Incorporated, and published by the New York State Conference of Mayors in the January/February 1995 issue of the New York State Municipal Bulletin, identifies ten downtown revitalization myths. These are explained further below:

Myth #1: If We Build It, They Will Come

This myth focuses on the belief that physical improvements will bring customers and investors flocking to downtown areas. Many communities have undertaken massive physical improvements including new sidewalks, landscaping, street trees, planters, benches, and facade improvements, with the primary thought being that once these improvements were completed, customers and investors would return to downtown.

Unfortunately, many communities learned that such improvements cannot be undertaken in isolation but must be completed in conjunction with economic improvements for revitalization efforts to succeed.

Myth #2: If We Demolish It, They Will Come

This myth is commonly referred to the Urban Renewal Approach to downtown revitalization. The myth holds that if old buildings are torn down and land is cleared, developers will flock to downtown. With the benefit of hindsight, we see that this premise did not hold true throughout many communities. Throughout many small and large cities, there are blocks of land cleared during the Urban Renewal Era that are still vacant today.

Since the Urban Renewal days, many communities have realized that this approach to downtown revitalization does not attract developers to a downtown area whose market is weak. Today, structurally sound buildings, no matter how rundown they may be, can become a tremendous draw if they are renovated and the architectural character is preserved. Many older, restored structures have become the most valuable commercial real estate throughout many communities.

Myth #3: If We Complete One Major Project, They Will Come

This myth is considered the "Silver Bullet Approach" to downtown revitalization. It maintains that if a

community identifies and implements one major project then all other things will take care of themselves. Examples of communities that have utilized the "Silver Bullet Approach" are those which have constructed convention centers, festival marketplaces, parking structures, or pedestrian malls. Again if these activities are undertaken in isolation of other economic improvements, the reality begins to set in that there really is no such thing as the "silver bullet."

Myth #4: If We Can't Get a Department Store to Come Back to Downtown, Downtown Will Never Be Healthy Again

This myth of downtown revitalization is commonly known as the "Traditional Anchor Approach." For the most part, the chances of attracting a major, national department store to most downtown areas are very slim. This does not, however, dictate that the downtown area can no longer be economically viable. The most successful downtowns today are those that have redefined the concept of "downtown anchors."

Throughout the country, many communities are embracing new definitions of anchors. Examples of these types of anchors include a children's discovery museum in Downtown Augusta, Maine; the Arcade Theater in Downtown St. Charles, Illinois; restaurants and entertainment facilities in Downtown Danbury, Connecticut; upper story housing in Westminster, Maryland; art galleries in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia; as well as professional shops and specialty retail shops. Communities that are promoting and leveraging these types of anchors are experiencing renewed vitality, without a traditional department store anchor.

Myth #5: We Can't Get a Department Store to Locate Downtown, So Downtown Can No Longer Support Any Kind of Retail Trade

This myth is commonly referred to as the "Big Retail or No Retail Approach" to downtown revitalization. As is the case with Myth #4, the chances of attracting a major, national department store to most downtowns are slim. It is also true that few downtowns today can be considered as being primarily retail centers. However, these truths alone do not prove that a downtown cannot support a degree of retail trade.

Most downtown professionals would argue that, by definition, a healthy downtown is one that contains some degree of retail activity. This belief holds that retail activities bring pedestrians to the downtown area, and therefore, gives the downtown a look of activity and health. No matter how healthy a downtown's economy actually is, without some degree of retail trade a downtown will look dead.

Today, most if not all, downtown revitalization programs operating in this country contain a retail enhancement component. Many downtowns have been successful in strengthening, and increasing the retail base. This has, in many instances, only been accomplished by clearly defining downtown's retail niche and implementing retail enhancement strategies that are very aggressive, very targeted, and that are usually geared to assist small, independent retailers.

Myth # 6: For Downtown to Be Successful, Downtown's Retail Businesses Must Keep Uniform Business Hours

During the last several years, attempts have been made by many downtown revitalization programs to standardize the hours of operation kept by downtown merchants. This is commonly known as the "Let's Pretend We're a Mall Approach" to downtown revitalization. Given the independent nature and large number of business owners in a downtown area these attempts to standardize hours of operation have been futile.

Attempts are being made to promote "market driven business hours." With this approach, retail businesses keep hours that best meet the needs of each establishment's targeted customers. By doing this, and by coordinating hours of operation with each other, these businesses are able to accommodate and share customers.

Uniform hours of operation are virtually impossible to achieve in downtown areas. Doing so has proven unsuccessful for most downtowns. Market driven hours have shown some success in drawing and maintaining shared customer bases.

Myth #7: Competition is Bad For Business

This myth is grounded in the "Head-In-The-Sand Approach" to downtown revitalization. The commercial districts that are the most successful in the country today are those in which similar and compatible businesses are located side by side in convenient groupings. There are numerous examples of communities that have clustered similar types of businesses together in their downtown areas and has proven to be very good for business.

Myth #8: We Have To Be As Lenient As Possible With Developers or They Won't Do Business in Our Community.

Myth #9: We Have To Be As Tough As Possible With Developers or They'll Take Advantage of Us

These myths are grounded in the "Play Dead or Play Hard Ball" approaches to downtown revitalization.

Developers will do business in communities that demand quality projects and that take steps to ensure they obtain such projects. Many developers prefer to do business in communities that demand quality projects and actually seek out said communities.

Also, communities that are unreasonably stringent and demanding of developers will cause developers to locate their projects elsewhere. This type of community is successful in making sure developers do not take advantage of them. This tough approach also makes them successful in not attracting quality developments to their communities.

Communities that have been most successful in obtaining quality development projects are those which have created working partnerships between the community, the city government, and local developers.

These alliances are most commonly known as "public-private partnerships." The essential ingredient for making the partnership a success is one of attitude. All parties in the partnership must agree to cooperate so that a quality project and one that is mutually beneficial results.

Myth #10: If We Had More Parking, They Would Come!

This myth is grounded in the "Let's Find a Scapegoat" approach to downtown revitalization. This myth is premised on the assumption that all of a downtown's ills stem from a lack of parking. Those who believe in this myth claim that customers have left downtown for shopping malls because the malls offer shoppers large parking areas. Therefore, the reasoning emerges by many downtown merchants that "if we had more parking, our downtown would be more competitive with the malls and bring the customers back downtown."

Again, many communities have made significant investments in downtown parking lots and garages, without making other needed economic improvements. If other economic development actions are not taken in conjunction with the construction of physical parking facilities, many communities have found that these facilities remain as empty as its downtown stores. Some communities are holding tight to the idea that "we need a parking problem in the downtown area" because this could mean that downtown stores are busy.

In many communities where the perceived lack of parking is considered to be the problem, it is usually a management problem rather than an actual shortage of parking. Some communities have found that an adequate number of parking spaces are available but they are being utilized by employees of downtown establishments.

Communities which have been most successful in re-attracting customers and clients are those where business owners attempt to differentiate their businesses and provide customers a compelling reason to patronize their establishments. Successful downtown business owners have found that if they offer what customers want (e.g., a specialized product, an exceptional service, a unique atmosphere, etc.) and make sure customers know that it is being offered, then the issue of parking often becomes irrelevant.

3.3 The Ten Secrets of Downtown Success

In addition to the myths of downtown redevelopment, there are also ten secrets of downtown success. In an article entitled, "The Ten Secrets of Downtown Success", by Dolores P. Palma of Hyatt-Palma, Incorporated, and published by the New York State Conference of Mayors in the March/April 1995 issue of the New York State Municipal Bulletin, identifies ten secrets of downtown success. These are explained further below:

Secret #1: Form Partnerships

Over the last twenty years, many communities have formed public-private partnerships which were designed to enhance downtown business districts. In these partnerships, the public sector and business community join together, make decisions together, and each sector did their part to reinvest in and reinvent their downtown. The most successful downtown revitalization programs today are those that are based in public/private partnerships.

Secret #2: Know Your Vision

The pro-active and successful way of revitalizing downtown areas is to define a clear, community driven vision of the direction the community wants its downtown to be headed. The defined vision must be realistic and must be shared by the business community, the civic community, the local government, and citizens of the community.

Secret #3: Be Market Driven

Conducting a downtown market analysis is the critical first step for success in revitalizing downtown areas. A realistic market analysis is an economic tool that downtown cannot succeed without. It is a tool that developers would not do business without. Also, all downtown players (e.g., City Hall, merchants, etc.), must have the same information at their disposal in order to be effective players in downtown revitalization.

Secret #4: Use a Business Plan

Businesses that operate according to a business plan are more successful than those who do not, and the same can be said about business districts. The most pro-active downtown partnerships are starting their programs by defining a clear course of action that is aggressively implemented in a timely manner. The business plan clearly spells out a course of action that will enable downtown to attain the defined community vision and capture the economic opportunities revealed in the downtown market analysis.

Secret #5: Dare to Be Different

To succeed economically, downtown areas must create, and become known for a particular niche in the marketplace. Downtown cannot compete with the malls or with the discounters. Instead, downtown must pursue an economic niche that will allow it to successfully co-exist with the malls and the discounters by being different and unique. This means that downtown must create its own economic themes. The goal of downtown revitalization is to make the downtown area distinct so that it will stand out in the mind of the consumer.

Secret #6: Focus

Most downtown areas are physically too large to revitalize all at once and the issues are too numerous to address at the same time. In every community, advocates and skeptics alike want to see improvements immediately. Because of this situation, the most successful downtown enhancement programs are those where limited resources (e.g., time, money, staff, volunteers, etc.) have been focused in well defined areas.

Secret #7: Be Self Sufficient

In today's economic times, communities must become self-reliant and resourceful. This means that downtown organizations, professionals, and local government officials must become adept at recognizing and nurturing local entrepreneurs and persuading them to locate in the downtown area.

Secret #8: Return to Old-Fashioned Values

The most successful downtowns are and will continue to be those that have realized that its major strength lies in doing business "the old-fashioned way." This means a return to personalized customer attention; providing value for money; guaranteeing the product; promotion of the downtown area; and stressing the community pride that results from a healthy downtown.

Secret #9: Be Pro-Business and Pro-Quality

Within any given community, business owners and real estate developers have many options when looking for a location in which to invest. For downtown to be the investment location of choice, the local government must be pro-business. This means revising regulations that make it hard to operate a business or invest in property downtown. Being pro-business means streamlining government processes (e.g., codes, licensing, etc.) so that investors can go into business as quickly as possible in a downtown location.

Secret #10: Know the indispensable "Five M's"

While downtowns cannot compete with the malls, they must be able to compete with them. The most successful downtowns are those that have learned and borrowed the best management techniques from the malls. These are identified below:

- Efficient and Cost Effective Management (e.g., mall management)
- Market Knowledge (e.g., know the downtown niche and targeted customers)
- Marketing (e.g., marketing techniques which "reach" the consumer)
- Maintenance (e.g., physical appearance)
- Money (e.g., financing of downtown revitalization efforts)

3.4 Downtown Improvement Activities: Historical Perspective, 1975 - 1990

The City of Oneonta has always been very active in the development and redevelopment of its downtown area. In the late 1970's, the City's philosophy for downtown renewal was changed from emphasizing retail development to one of diversity. Efforts were made to diversify downtown into other activities because it was clear that suburban malls were here to stay. These activities included making downtown a professional commercial center with medical and health related services, banking, insurance and other commercial services such as specialty retail and eating establishments. It also included the reinforcement of downtown as a government center with the expansion of federal, state and county functions. Most importantly, there was a major effort to encourage people to live downtown by creating new, innovative living spaces. With more people living downtown, the Central Business District would become a more active, vibrant place.

The City's Downtown Improvement Program was initiated in 1980 with two particular objectives. First, incentives were offered to encourage acquisition and development of vacant or soon to be vacant buildings. Emphasis has always been placed on efforts to minimize the effects of vacant buildings by assisting in the productive reuse of these structures. Second, vacant upper floors provided potential for new residential spaces that were originally apartments many years ago.

Over 89 new units were constructed under the Downtown Investment Program since 1980. An additional 60 units were constructed privately and an additional 32 units were under construction in 1989. Over 25 commercial buildings were also renovated during this period. This program is another example of how "subsidized seed" money can set the framework for additional investment from the private sector.

It was also during this time of the early 1980's that the City made major commitments to the downtown by building a new public safety building, rebuilding the Old Post Office into a new City Hall and the complete reconstruction of Main Street and several side streets. This direct public investment into the City's infrastructure was another building stone in the effort to create a strong foundation for development.

The City's effort was recognized by the receipt of two historic preservation awards for the Old Post Office and the Cunningham restoration projects. Retaining the historic fabric and character of significant downtown buildings is an integral part of renewal efforts.

3.5 Downtown Improvement Strategies: Contemporary Perspective, 1990 - current.

Downtown improvement strategies since 1990 have continued to focus on downtown renewal, economic development and job creation activities. The City Community Development Office has been successful in securing a number of HUD Small Cities Grants for downtown improvements, most notably, the Oneonta Hotel Project. The hotel will be constructed on the vacant Urban Renewal Lot located on Market Street. Construction of the hotel will complete the City's Urban Renewal Project initiated in the 1970's.

Additionally, the City Community Development Office has been an active participant in the implementation of the "Comprehensive Plan for Addressing Violent Behavior" initiated in 1993. The Office participated in the implementation of this plan in the following ways: completed the parking garage relighting project; improved the lighting conditions on Water Street; coordinated the installation of the video surveillance cameras; and staff members, as well as numerous other department heads and staff, were on call every weekend to assist in monitoring downtown activities.

Furthermore, Community Development Office has been committed to many other downtown improvements such as increased street and sidewalk cleaning, tree and flower plantings, painted street poles, rebuilt railings and sidewalk improvements.

Additionally, the City has been instrumental in the initiation of the Downtown Oneonta Improvement Task Force (DOIT). DOIT's mission was to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the downtown area. Further clarification about the role of DOIT can be found in Section 3.5 of this chapter. Information regarding implementation of the DOIT plan can be found in Section 3.5 (5).

Last, the City of Oneonta has developed a Downtown Revolving Loan Program in conjunction with Wilber National Bank. The program will provide loan assistance to businesses in Downtown Oneonta. Assistance will include loan interest loans to retailers of goods and non-professional services in downtown Oneonta for exterior/interior improvements, working capital, inventory, and equipment to promote increased profitability and employment.

The stated function and goals of the loan program include:

- To strengthen the commercial base in the downtown area by stabilizing existing businesses and attracting new ones.
- To create new and retain existing jobs for primarily low and moderate income persons in retail and commercial enterprises.
- To stimulate new private investment within the downtown area.
- To be consistent with the Downtown Oneonta Improvement Task Force Strategic Plan.

3.6 Downtown Improvement Strategies: Merchant Perspective

The Center for Community and Economic Development at the State University College at Oneonta conducted a survey of the downtown retail merchants in 1992. The Center approached the Downtown Retail Merchants Association with a proposal to conduct a survey in order to assess their view of doing business on Main Street. The Association accepted the proposal, officially sanctioned the project and cooperated fully in the completion of the survey. The following is taken from the final report submitted to the merchants by the Center for Community and Economic Development entitled, "Main Street Merchants Survey, Oneonta, NY, Report of Survey Results, June 1992."

The objective of the survey was to identify key concerns of the downtown merchants, inquire about possible solutions to the challenges they faced and assess how the merchants conduct their business. The survey project was conducted by Mr. Steven Ratto, a Center Intern, in cooperation with Mr. Marc

Breese of the Merchant's Association. Mr. Ratto personally visited each store on Main Street and attempted to interview every store owner. For the purpose of the survey, Main Street was defined as including all stores encompassing the area from the intersection of Grove Street and Clinton Plaza, the entire length of Main Street to the corner of Elm and Main Streets.

Forty-four interviews were completed and served as the basis for the survey. Of the 44 merchants, 47 percent had been in operation 5 years or less, 19 percent had been in operation 6 to 10 years, 21 percent had been in operation 11 to 20 years and 14 percent had been in operation 21 years or more. The overall profile of the City's Main Street is not unlike most Main Streets in the nation which are experiencing regular turnover in small business composition. This phenomenon is not necessarily a problem, especially if the turnover constitutes a managed effort to maintain a viable store mix in which the component stores complement each other.

The survey questions were grouped into five categories. These included the following:

Section I: Doing Business on Main Street

Questions in this category focused on issues such as business locations on Main Street, Exterior Appearance of Stores, Customer Complaints about Parking, Highest and Lowest Periods of Consumer Traffic, Business Hours of Main Street Merchants, and Impact of Downtown Events.

Business Locations on Main Street

Merchants expressed an overwhelming satisfaction with their Main Street locations. Those who stated they were "somewhat satisfied" are clustered in two locations. The first cluster is in Clinton Plaza and the second is in the Ford Avenue and Main Street block extending to Elm Street. The latter location has experienced frequent turnover in store front occupancy in recent years, especially in the vicinity of the corner of Main and Elm Streets.

Exterior Appearance of Stores

Most merchants stated they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the exterior appearance of their store. Merchants less satisfied with their store's exterior appearance are primarily ones who have operated on Main Street for five years or less.

Customer Complaints About Parking

Parking was a major concern to merchants in the survey. According to merchants, 88 percent of customers express concern about parking. When asked for suggestions about what should be done about the parking problem, the solutions offered by the merchants can be categorized into five basic categories. These include the following:

- a. Construction of a parking garage on Dietz Street
- b. Improve the downtown parking garage including general refurbishment, repair and adding another level. It should be noted that a significant amount of work has been done on the

- parking garage since the time of the survey (e.g., new lighting).
- c. Logistical changes including redesigning Main Street, closing it off to traffic, reducing the number of loading and handicapped zones and making the City Hall parking lot open to public parking after business hours.
 - d. Impose restrictions on college student parking such as specifying areas for downtown student residents to park, have both colleges construct additional parking lots on their campuses, allow only juniors and seniors to have cars, restrict students from downtown parking lots.
 - e. Encourage the colleges to refrain from charging students for parking on campus.

Highest and Lowest Periods of Consumer Traffic

The survey explored periods of high and low consumer traffic. It was determined that the time frame of 11:00 am to 6:00 pm. was a period of high consumer traffic while the period before Noon and after 5:00 pm to be a period of low consumer traffic. This pattern suggests that it may be beneficial for most merchants to open around 11:00 am and stay open until 8:00 pm. According to what merchants report as busy consumer traffic periods, it appears that there is more potential to build consumer traffic during the middle and later part of the day than in the morning.

Business Hours of Main Street Merchants

Most merchants adhere to a 9:00 am to 5:00 pm business schedule. If these actual business hours are compared with the consumer traffic patterns reported in the section above, then it suggests that many merchants might want to seriously consider revising their present business hours.

Impact of Downtown Events

The merchants assessment of the impact of special downtown events on their businesses is divided. It should be noted that much of the disenchantment with special downtown events stems from merchants located in the Clinton Plaza. They expressed the desire to be included in future downtown events. When Main Street is closed to accommodate downtown events, the Clinton Plaza area remains open to traffic.

Section II: Assessing Municipal and Private Services

In terms of municipal services, merchants expressed strong satisfaction with most municipal and private services. However, respondents expressed some dissatisfaction with street cleaning and traffic control services. The survey was unable to definitively explain this dissatisfaction due to not having any follow up questions regarding said services. The Center for Community and Economic Development did provide some possible explanations.

First, the low ranking of street cleaning services may be due to litter which results from weekend activities. Since street sweeping crews are not on duty until early Monday morning, downtown can sometimes appear somewhat disheveled. Since the inception of the Downtown Oneonta Improvement

Task Force (DOIT) during 1994, this perception of filth on Main Street may be somewhat blunted due to clean up activities. The efforts of DOIT will be discussed later in this chapter.

Second, the City of Oneonta initiated a new traffic control system in December 1991 on Main Street in order to facilitate the flow of traffic. According to City of Oneonta Engineering Technician James Hawver, the system has facilitated excellent traffic flow on Main Street. The only issue remaining is traffic flow on the side streets. Waiting time to access Main Street from the side streets has been extended during peak traffic periods. The traffic flow policy may have created perceptual problems while actually serving to improve Main Street traffic flow. Additionally, the police and fire departments have reported decreased response time due to the better flow of traffic.

Section III: The Impact of Macro Economic Factors

Questions in this category focused on issues such as Impact of the Sales Tax Increase, and the Impact of the Economic Recession. The major conclusions derived from the survey were that the 1992 increase in the sales tax had a negligible impact on Main Street businesses and that the recession has adversely impacted New York State businesses generally. Main Street merchants have not been immune from these adverse economic trends/conditions.

Section IV: Perspectives of Merchants on Marketing

Questions in this category focused on issues such as Marketing to College Students, and the Impact of Tourism on Sales.

Marketing to College Students

Most merchants on Main Street make a special effort to attract college students into their establishments. However, the methods used to attract college students are not much different than those used to induce non-college age customers. Efforts to market to college students are predicated on the significant economic impact which student spending has on Main Street businesses.

Marketing to Tourists

A significant portion of merchants indicated that 10 percent or more of sales could be attributed to purchases by tourists. Merchants are benefitting from tourism despite a rather passive effort to attract tourist spending. With greater effort, merchants might be able to increase their market share of tourist dollars and thereby, minimize to some extent the loss of student customers during the summer months.

Section V: Factors Shaping The Future of Main Street

Questions in this category focused on issues such as Economic Impact of New Downtown Hotel, Extending Business Hours to Counteract the Mall, Role of Merchants and City Government in Improving Main Street Prosperity, and the Future of Main Street Business Climate.

Construction of Downtown Hotel

Most merchants stated that construction of the hotel complex on Market Street will increase sales for their businesses. However, many merchants also believed that the hotel will put a "squeeze" on downtown parking. Some speculated that store sales could be adversely impacted due to the loss of parking.

Impact of Southside Mall

Roughly half of the merchants surveyed stated that the Southside Mall poses "little" or "no impact" while a small portion stated it poses "some impact." These results likely reflect the fact that stores on Main Street represent a broad mix of businesses with established market niches. However, this is not to say that the mall is not a significant source of competition. It certainly impacts all businesses on Main Street in one form or another.

The competition it poses may not be based primarily on market strategy but simply that the mall competes for gross consumer traffic. In this sense, the mall is capable of attracting a significant flow of consumers. Lacking this flow of customers, Main Street merchants must begin to employ creative marketing and other extraordinary efforts to build market share.

Extension of Hours

A majority of merchants stated that they would not consider staying open beyond the traditional 5:00 pm closing time. This reluctance could be related to the above since a majority of merchants do not feel their competition comes from the Southside Mall but rather amongst themselves.

Role of Merchants and City Government

There was overwhelming support for the position that merchants and the City government should "take special steps to improve the economic prosperity of Main Street businesses." This sentiment is substantiated with the active and on-going commitment to DOIT by the merchants and by city representatives. Many merchants view the future of Main Street with "guarded optimism".

Merchant Survey Recommendations

From their analysis of the survey results, representatives from the Center for Community and Economic Development set forth some recommendations and conclusions regarding the merchant perspective. These include the following:

Need to Consider Future Business Mix of Main Street

The current marketing strategy of Main Street requires fundamental revision if niche marketing is to succeed and the consumer base of Main Street is to expand. However, a successful marketing strategy is contingent upon reducing internal competition. As a result, greater attention must be dedicated to

insuring an appropriate and compatible mix of stores. A diverse business base will drive a comprehensive marketing strategy which can benefit the majority of merchants. Until this occurs, each store will pursue its own marketing effort and comprehensive efforts to market Main Street will likely be less than successful.

Main Street Needs Marketing Information and Insight

Discussions with merchants during the course of the survey indicate that many are not confident about their target markets. Since it is prohibitive for individual firms to conduct in-depth marketing research, perhaps a collective study should be jointly sponsored by the Downtown Retail Merchants Association and the City of Oneonta Government. An important aspect of this study would include a survey of consumers, to develop an empirical profile of the Main Street consumer. This study should assess different facets of the consumer base of Main Street (e.g., by exploring if work week consumers, weekend consumers and Thursday evening consumers constitute unique consumer bases).

Also, a comprehensive and professional marketing study is needed of the college student market. Students constitute a potential market of nearly 7,000 consumers and a more focused and informed Main Street strategy is needed to successfully "capture" this significant market.

Finally, some merchants may be in a position to take advantage of tourism. Unlike area shopping centers and malls which promote chain stores and discount retailers, Main Street has some unique stores which sell products that appeal to tourists. Perhaps these product lines could be enhanced and other specialty stores encouraged to locate on Main Street. This proposition requires further study and should be included as an important component of any comprehensive marketing study of Main Street.

Accommodate Concerns of Clinton Plaza Merchants

In the planning of future downtown events, the interests of the Clinton Plaza merchants should be taken into consideration. Methods should be considered which would afford pedestrians easy access to the Clinton Plaza.

An Effective Merchant/Government Partnership is Needed

The Main Street Merchants and the City Government should join forces in an aggressive and proactive manner to promote the prosperity of Main Street. The Downtown Oneonta Improvement Task Force has addressed this recommendation since its inception in late 1993.

Summary Analysis of Merchants Survey

Generally, the survey of Main Street merchants produced results which were positive and optimistic. The general pattern of responses reflected a business community which is satisfied with its downtown location and wishes to play an active role in improving the economic viability of Main Street.

The key to improving Main Street lies in creative and strategic management. A strong partnership between the merchants and the City of Oneonta is an important first step in achieving this goal. The creation of DOIT has formalized this commitment.

3.7 Downtown Improvement Strategies: Downtown Oneonta Improvement Task Force (DOIT)

Introduction

The results of the previous survey suggested a need to address a wide variety of merchant concerns. While no immediate action was taken to follow through on the previous study discussions continued as to how to address the merchants' concerns. In September 1993, representatives of the DRMA, the City Government and the Center for Economic and Community Development met to establish a working task force. At this meeting there was an agreement to charge the task force with conducting a strategic plan for downtown Oneonta.

The first meeting was held on October 20, 1993 and the group resolved to call itself the "Downtown Oneonta Improvement Task Force" (DOIT). This section is taken from DOIT's plan entitled, "Strategic Plan for Downtown Oneonta". The complete plan is provided in Comprehensive Plan Appendix A. The plan was prepared for DOIT by the Center for Economic and Community Development of the State University College at Oneonta.

Representatives of the DRMA and Oneonta City Government identified a list of merchants, property owners and community leaders to serve on the task force. In order to insure an efficient and effective working group, the task force membership was intentionally limited. In addition, those invited to serve on the task force had to be recognized as a "stakeholder" associated with the future of downtown Oneonta.

In some instances, key "stakeholders" were invited but elected not to attend. However, whenever citizens expressed an interest in joining the task force, they were invited to attend future meetings. Under no circumstances was anyone discouraged from joining the task force.

In order to effectively guide its work, DOIT developed a mission statement which states:

Our mission is to promote a stronger downtown by developing a strategic plan for economic growth, civic interdependence, and social and cultural vitality. We believe downtown is a vital component of the region's economy and symbolizes the social, cultural and economic achievements of our great city. We intend to identify the key social and economic issues impacting downtown and develop a plan with goals, objectives and strategies to address them.

The Strategic Planning Process

DOIT adopted a basic strategic planning process in order to examine Downtown Oneonta and its future. The process includes four steps which include the following:

Geographical definition of downtown

The downtown area was last defined about 25 years ago under the City's Urban Renewal Plan. In the plan, the downtown area was defined in a traditional manner and encompassed the Central Business District (CBD). The downtown included the area from the intersection of Grove Street and Clinton Plaza down the entire length of Main Street to the corner of Elm and Main Street. This definition was adequate for community development activities during the 1970's. However, post 1970s trends in residential, commercial and medical growth within the City suggested to DOIT that the geographical boundary of downtown needed to be reconsidered.

Therefore, DOIT considered a broader, more encompassing definition of downtown. The new definition incorporates Main Street from Interstate 88 to Seventh Street, beyond A.O. Fox Memorial Hospital and up Chestnut Street to the corner of West Street and Chestnut Street.

Situational Analysis

In order to facilitate identification of the assets and liabilities of Downtown Oneonta, DOIT focused on six broad categories of concern. These included the following:

- a. Infrastructure/physical attributes
- b. Image/quality of life/ social/living attributes
- c. Business conditions
- d. Students as consumers
- e. Tourists as consumers
- f. Residents as consumers

For each of these areas of concern, DOIT members identified strengths and challenges. These were then ranked according to what the membership considered to be the top five strengths and the top five challenges with each category. The rankings were then totaled and average rank scores were identified for each category.

These factors were then used to identify priority concerns, as well as goals and objectives to guide development of the strategic action plan. The strategic plan provided in full in Appendix A ensued based on the above factors. The plan followed a specific format including the statement of each goal, identified strengths and challenges as ranked by participants, statement of objectives, analysis of objectives, analysis of objectives, identification of organization responsible for implementation and deadline for implementation. The goals nor the objectives were listed in priority order. Downtown's future will depend on addressing all the goals and objectives identified in the plan.

Goals and Objectives

The goals and objectives as developed by DOIT are summarized below. For more detailed information about each goal and objective, refer to Comprehensive Plan Appendix B.

GOAL 1: IMPROVE QUALITY OF DOWNTOWN INFRASTRUCTURE

- Objective 1.1: Examine parking problem and expand capacity where possible.
- Objective 1.2: Install street signage to direct traffic to parking garage and public parking lots
- Objective 1.3: Conduct property inventory of older buildings to identify ways to improve their appearance and use.
- Objective 1.4: Inspect and improve storm drain system
- Objective 1.5: Assess downtown public transportation needs and if needed develop system to improve access at a reasonable cost.

GOAL 2: IMPROVE IMAGE AND FIRST IMPRESSION

- Objective 2.1: Develop Consistent signage with harmonious theme.
- Objective 2.2: Improve Appearance of Approaches to Downtown
- Objective 2.3: Improve Appearance of Downtown Properties
- Objective 2.4: Implement program to decorate vacant store fronts and install explanatory signage on vacant lots.
- Objective 2.5: Enhance bandstand area as a focal point for future downtown events or displays.
- Objective 2.6: Develop program to promote public awareness that downtown has a safe shopping environment.
- Objective 2.7: Develop program to reduce and/or move loitering away from the Central Business District Area.
- Objective 2.8: Establish cooperative effort between city government, entertainment and recreation establishments to reduce littering, insure early clean-up of streets and city parking garage.
- Objective 2.9: Encourage landlords to institute stricter regulations on tenants with regard to house parties and use of alcohol.

GOAL 3: SUPPORT NEEDS OF BUSINESS AND PROMOTE ECONOMIC GROWTH IN DOWNTOWN AREA

- Objective 3.1: Create a downtown organization representing all stakeholders associated with downtown.
- Objective 3.2: Develop a business support services program to help meet the financial and technical needs of downtown businesses.
- Objective 3.3: Review local government regulations on downtown area and assess impact on future economic development.
- Objective 3.4: Conduct a retail market study of downtown.
- Objective 3.5: Conduct student marketing survey.
- Objective 3.6: Conduct resident marketing survey.
- Objective 3.7: Develop marketing strategy for tourists.
- Objective 3.8: Develop a downtown business policy for the purpose of establishing consistent retail strategies.
- Objective 3.9: Conduct workshops for retail and service sector owners, managers,

and employees to improve their relationship with minority and student customers.

GOAL 4: ESTABLISH DOWNTOWN MANAGEMENT OF OPERATIONS SYSTEM

- Objective 4.1: Establish management vehicle to guide the day-to-day operation of downtown area.
- Objective 4.2: Coordination of publicity campaign on behalf of downtown.
- Objective 4.3: Create database of demographic and economic information for downtown area which will serve as a resource tool for management of downtown.

- Objective 4.4: Integrate downtown marketing strategy to tourists with regional tourism strategy plan.
- Objective 4.5: Establish formal working partnership between medical establishments and downtown merchants.
- Objective 4.6: Coordinate efforts and mobilize resources to support business recruitment aimed at insuring a proper mix of retail and service establishments.

GOAL 5: PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

- Objective 5.1: Integrate City Comprehensive Plan with Downtown Strategic Plan
- Objective 5.2: Update Downtown Strategic Plan every two years.
- Objective 5.3: Develop long range vision plan for future of downtown -- ten years out.

Evaluation or Assessment

The success of any strategic plan requires continual monitoring and assessment. Most of the objectives outlined in the strategic plan are measurable and/or subject to some form of confirmation. However, a strategic plan forces a broader view, draws attention to broad based goals, and in this instance, charts a future direction for downtown.

The findings of the Downtown Oneonta Strategic Plan demonstrate the importance of image, perception, and management. These are the real issues which will ultimately dictate the success of the strategic plan. Each of these issues require long-term, daily commitment and attention to detail.

As the strategic plan reveals, the revitalization of Downtown Oneonta is not the sole responsibility of any one organization. The history of downtown is one of significant "fits and starts" as its physical infrastructure has evolved. This impressive structural development was primarily led by the City of Oneonta. Today, however, the future of Downtown Oneonta is far more demanding. It requires the wise stewardship of infrastructure, strong day-to-day management, and most of all, a shared commitment by all "stakeholders" to work together on behalf of downtown.

There is no "quick fix" for the challenges facing downtown today. Downtown has evolved over many decades and efforts to build on its strengths, as well as to resolve its challenges, will be measured in

years not months. Clearly, armed with a strategic plan to point the way, what will be required is wise leadership and dedicated followership.

Plan Implementation

The City of Oneonta, in cooperation with the Downtown Oneonta Improvement Task Force, the Center for Economic and Community Development, and other interested parties, submitted a grant to the Urban Development Corporation's Regional Economic Development Partnership Program (REDPP), to implement various components of the Strategic Plan for Downtown Oneonta. The City of Oneonta was notified by the UDC in December 1994, that the application was funded. The grant will facilitate implementation of Goals 3 and 4 of the Plan.

Project Purpose and Objectives

The project has been designed to support the economic revitalization of the City of Oneonta's Central Business District and promote development of the Oneonta area as the business and retail hub of the Eastern Southern Tier Subregion. The proposed project is designed to implement two major goals as stated in the Strategic Plan for Downtown Oneonta. Within the scope of these two goals, six objectives will be the focus of the proposed project. These goals and objectives are as follows.

Goal 3: Support the Needs of Businesses and Promote Economic Growth in the Downtown Area

Objective 3.4: Conduct Retail Market Area Study of Downtown

In order to address the loss of local revenue resulting from the closure of Bresees' Department Store, leakage of consumer dollars to areas East and West of Oneonta, mail order shopping and increased vacancies, a study to determine downtown's market area is critically needed. Surveying the base of downtown will help the business sector identify downtown's trade area, identify consumer markets, develop strategies to satisfy consumer needs, and ultimately increase traffic flow to the central business district. Most important the study will reveal why consumers choose, or do not choose, to shop downtown.

Furthermore, the City of Oneonta has recently implemented the Mixed Use Development District which allow greater flexibility in locating home based businesses in the residential areas. A retail study will provide an ideal opportunity to promote growth in viable home occupations.

Objective 3.5: Conduct Student Marketing Survey

Students attending two local institutions of higher education, the State University of New York, College at Oneonta and Hartwick, constitute over 40 percent of the total city population. Students have high levels of disposable income and identifying their consumer needs is of critical importance.

Objective 3.6: Conduct Resident Marketing Survey

The changing demographics of City residents, together with the presence of nearly 7,000 students, has

created a diversified and complex market base. The closure of Bresees' Department Store has dramatically altered shopping patterns. This impact needs to be assessed. Also, the consumer patterns of residents of neighboring rural towns and villages are relatively unknown, particularly the impact of Oneonta's retail base on them. The survey of the City's residents as well as the population of its market area is necessary to assess changing consumer needs.

Objective 3.7: Develop Marketing Strategy for Tourists

The City of Oneonta is located near a myriad of entertainment and cultural attractions such as Doubleday Field, the Farmer's Museum and the National Baseball Hall of Fame (Cooperstown). Other nearby attractions include Glimmerglass Opera, Corvette Museum and Howe Caverns. Further, the National Soccer Hall of Fame is located just north of the City's Main Street. Developing a strategy to attract visitors shop, combined with a forthcoming hotel on Main Street, will enhance Oneonta's attraction as a tourist destination site. This will extend lodging income and the length of time visitors stay in the area. This is an ever growing consumer base which must be cultivated by area merchants.

Goal 4: Establish a Management Vehicle to Guide the Day-to-Day Operation of the Downtown Area

The Strategic Plan for Downtown Oneonta recognizes the need to create a position solely responsible for the management of downtown and the active promotion of the central business district. The City Community Development Office and the DOIT Executive Committee have accepted responsibility for these duties until a downtown management entity is established.

Objective 4.3: Create a database of Demographic and Economic Information for Downtown Area Which Will Serve as a Resource Tool for Management of Downtown.

The project as funded will purchase software and assist in the creation of a downtown database. The database system will contain up-to-date demographic data, investment, retail sales, property maintenance, market data, traffic patterns, property vacancy rates, crime rates, parking inventory, and other information. This resource will be used to develop strategies and help City Government, DOIT, retail merchants, college administrators, and community leaders to manage and promote downtown.

Objective 4.6: Coordinate Efforts and Mobilize Resources to Support Business Recruitment Aimed at Insuring a Proper Mix of Retail and Service Establishments

In recent years, the Central Business District has faced the challenge of increased vacancies and business turnovers. As previously noted, Main Street has lost Bresees' Department Store, its downtown anchor, in the spring of 1994. Other retail establishments have closed their doors including Woolworth's in late 1993. With the upcoming arrival of chain stores such as Wal-Mart and BJ's, downtown establishments will be forced to absorb another phase of increased competition from highly successful, high volume stores.

The development of a market plan addressing niche markets for established and new downtown

businesses is important if the goal of increasing consumer traffic to downtown is to be achieved. An active recruitment program to attract select businesses, while ensuring a good mix of residential and commercial space, is a high priority in the effort to insure the future economic viability of downtown.

Completing this task will provide downtown with a proactive, professional business recruitment program. This program will include promotional materials such as maps of downtown, statistical profiles of the city, definition of the market area, rental rates, sales volume projections for various businesses, listings of available space, and descriptions of services available to businesses.

Project Benefits

The economic viability of the City of Oneonta has been compromised by the loss of its anchor store. However, the arrival of national chain stores, such as Wal-Mart, will increase consumer traffic throughout the region. As a result it is imperative that the Central Business District develop market niches and have the proper mix of retail and service sector establishments to effectively capitalize on the expected increase in consumer traffic.

The project will directly benefit all commercial, retail, and service sector establishments located within the downtown area. The results will be used to increase pedestrian traffic, identify market trends, encourage recruitment of complimentary business establishments and services, and attract business start-ups by entrepreneurs.

Revitalization of downtown Oneonta will also benefit employees of downtown businesses and provide future employment growth. Both Hartwick College and SUNY Oneonta will benefit from the project, since their efforts to recruit and retain students significantly depends on the economic viability of the downtown. Students need a wide variety of retail products and services. The capacity of the local economy to meet these needs is an important consideration of students deciding to attend and remain at area colleges.

Finally, the project as funded will enhance the link between the downtown business community and its rapidly growing medial services sector. This key link enables the City to attract consumers from the enormous flow of visitor traffic generated by the medical services sector.

3.8 Summary Analysis of Downtown Improvement Activities/Strategies

The City of Oneonta, through various public and private partnerships, has taken proactive steps to ensure the continued viability of its downtown business district. These activities combined with the Strategic Plan as set forth by DOIT will serve as a solid base for future downtown improvement/enhancement. Obviously, downtown businesses simply cannot compete with the Wal-Marts or K-Marts and the other numerous discount type stores. Downtown Oneonta must become a home of "niche" markets, offering merchandise and services to consumers that the malls and discount stores cannot offer. Past and current actions taken by the City and community based groups such as DOIT will ensure that Downtown Oneonta will continue to thrive economically and remain the centerpiece of the City's retail and service activity.