

CHAPTER 7

DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION

The continued economic viability of any downtown area depends on the ability to find niches for both service and retail needs, coupled with a sense of community and convenience not found in large malls or major retail chains. Another important advantage for downtowns is their ability to integrate several needs (i.e., retail, service, entertainment, official) into one visit, with a minimum of traffic congestion-related delay. Thirdly, the personal relationship developed between customer and merchant is unique to downtowns. In most cases customers are dealing with people who have more than just an employment stake in the business. In this way, a customer would visit the jeweler rather than the jewelry store, the hair dresser rather than the salon, or the baker rather than the bakery.

Downtown Hobart has enjoyed remarkable retail and service customer loyalty. However, if it is to grow with the demands of expanding population and continue to withstand increasing pressures from the Rt. 30 corridor, it must make major changes.

A detailed market analysis or architectural study is far beyond the scope of this intended coverage; however, both should follow this document. In this analysis a series of observations will be made and their impact on future land use decisions will be assessed.

Accessibility

Lake George is an important attraction for the mixed use nature of the downtown area but, from a transportation standpoint, it presents numerous problems. There are only two accesses from the west, where the bulk of the population resides, Third Street and Ridge Road. Front, Second, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth all terminate at the Lake. Direct access from the north does not exist due to the Deep River Flood Plain and the old city landfill location. Duck Creek, a tributary to Deep River, isolates the downtown area on the northeast and east, limiting access from the east to Third Street. Due to the proximity of existing rail crossings, the only access to the downtown area from the south is Main Street or St. Road 51. These constraints effectively delineate the downtown and limit its expansion. They also result in congestion which reduces the downtown of additional capacity. Due to the limitations placed on this area, other problems such as parking are more challenging.

Proximity

Despite the accessibility problems identified above, the downtown is conveniently located close to the bulk of the residential population, and also adjacent to several public facilities (i.e., City Hall, post office, middle school).

Signage

Signage in the downtown area is probably one of the more serious liabilities. It is confusing, unorganized, and follows no pattern. Several signs project over the public right-of-way and tend to block one another. The maintenance and appearance of several signs are in question. Downtown areas, because of their nature, require different sign regulations; however, they also lend themselves to planning and coordination. A theme or similar treatment is strongly recommended. The City should offer a financial incentive to encourage participation.

Parking

When the number of parking spaces currently available are summed, it is apparent that there is enough land dedicated for that purpose; however, this does not mean that a parking problem does not exist. The existing parking is a mixture of private and public lots and on-street parking. There is no organization or coordination to the parking (i.e., short-term, long-term, emergency, etc.). Poor signage and directions to parking promotes overuse of on-street spaces. Existing parking facilities are not accessible one to the other, which wastes space. They are also devoid of landscaping and most are in poor physical condition. There is no coordination concerning when lots are used for their primary purpose and when they may be made available for secondary uses. The City and Chamber should work together to acquire additional lot access, improve the appearance and condition of the lots, coordinate their use, improve signage and directions to access parking, and discourage the use of on-street parking.

Housing

It appears that the occupancy of the second floor housing units is rather high; however, the condition of some units are poor. A concerted effort should be made to promote tax incentives for reinvestment in the downtown area.

Streetscape/Building Appearance

Although the array of architectural diversity is an asset in the downtown area, the reinvestment necessary to the continued public safety and functionality of these buildings has, with a few notable exceptions, either been lacking altogether or has been conducted without being sensitive to this architectural integrity. One way the City can encourage reinvestment in a coordinated way is to help fund a theme-based streetscape plan, provide economic incentives if the plan is followed, and to fund the portion of the streetscape improvements on public property. In addition, building histories should be developed to determine significance. Several buildings could be placed on the National Register for Historic Places. The City is currently developing a streetscape master plan. Gateways into the downtown, as well as signage, parking lot edge treatment, and design will be incorporated. Funding is currently available to begin implementing streetscape amenities.

Lake Front Development - Phases I & II

Although the development of Lake George has community-wide significance, it is adjacent to and has a powerful influence on the downtown area. As such, it will be discussed as a part of the downtown revitalization. During Phase I of the development, the City's role was reduced due to a lack of funding and support. The Hobart Industrial Economic Development Corporation, a private non-for-profit organization, provided the leadership necessary to initiate the development of the lakefront.

In 1986, the Hobart Industrial and Commercial Foundation formed the Hobart Industrial Economic Development Corporation (HIEDC) to develop a program for Hobart's future. The first question the Corporation asked itself was, "What is Hobart's greatest resource?" The unanimous answer was Lake George and Hobart's adjacent downtown business district. So HIEDC developed an economic development and recreational plan in three phases called Hobart's Lakefront Development. HIEDC also formed a Retention and Expansion Committee to address the overall needs of the City and the business community. Because of its growth and success, HIEDC formed its own corporation with an active board of directors in January 1990.

Ground was broken for Phase I in May of 1988. An unsightly retention pond and landfill on the border of Hobart's downtown business district was transformed into a beautiful Lakefront Festival Park, completed in October 1990. Phase I includes a band shell, a natural amphitheater, brick paved pedestrian and bicycle path, a walkway accessing the lake, decorative outdoor lighting, a paved driveway and parking area and a plaza at the entrance with a water fountain, flagpoles and plaques recognizing donors to the park. The Community Center, located on the western edge of Phase I, has increased its usage tenfold since the completion of Hobart's Lakefront Festival Park. Phase I was financed by two state programs, the Indiana Department of Commerce Neighborhood Assistance Program and the Indiana Department of Natural Resources Land and Water Conservation Fund, as well as contributions from local businesses, community groups and citizens. The state share covered approximately 40 percent of the project costs and the local share 60 percent.

Phase II got underway in February of 1991 when HIEDC signed a contract for preliminary engineering with the architectural design firm Bonar and Associates of Fort Wayne. On April 9th and 10th of 1991, HIEDC sponsored an intensive workshop where over 100 people brought ideas to improve Hobart's lakefront. Those in attendance included city officials, land owners, business owners and managers and residents of all ages including the Hobart High School Lake George Study Class. Ninety percent of their ideas and suggestions were incorporated into the master plan for Phase II.

Phase II, completed in 1997, developed an open park and plaza area along the shoreline of Lake George behind the downtown business district. The development has significantly enhanced the recreational use of the area by providing greater access to the lake and lakefront for fishing, boating, cycling, walking and jogging, and spectator access

to activities on the lake. From an economic development perspective, the development has beautified a blighted commercial area, attracted large numbers of visitors and shoppers, provided accessible parking and created a positive image of downtown Hobart. The Lakefront and Festival Park now serve as destinations themselves. It is expected that some amount of building reuse will take place for businesses that can utilize the lakefront and connecting bike trails to their advantage. Phase II has also served as an extension of festivals and community events into the business district. Phase II connects with the Lakefront Festival Park at the covered bridge over the dam for two and one-half blocks to Third Street. It included the following facilities and improvements:

1. A lakefront promenade and bicycle path, which includes a new seawall, brick pathway, decorative lighting, park benches, green space and landscaping.
2. A fishing pier with a gazebo.
3. A picnic green with lawn area, picnic tables.
4. A floating fountain.
5. A lake bowl amphitheater for viewing lakefront activities.
6. New and improved parking along the lakefront, (more than forty new spaces).
7. Concrete walkways connecting the parking areas to the lakefront promenade.
8. A drop off cul-de-sac and plaza area at the foot of Front street near the fishing pier.
9. A clock tower at the Third Street entrance.

Phase III

The City is currently pursuing the continuation of the Lakefront Development by initiating the planning of Phase III, which involves the area from 3rd Street to the Norfolk & Western Railroad Tracks, behind City Hall. This project aesthetically improves a very unsightly area behind the businesses from Third to Fourth Street, and could significantly organize, beautify, and optimize parking. The following are recommendations for the construction of Phase III of the Lakefront Development:

1. The access drive along the existing alley from 3rd Street to the city hall parking lot should be relocated to the west as close as possible to lining up with the curb cut on the north side of 3rd.
2. The location of existing trash bins along the buildings are unsightly. It is recommended that plans be sent to the trash haulers for input on where the trash bins could be located, and how they may be screened.

3. The private parking lots between 3rd and 4th Streets should be combined and expanded as much as possible to increase the number of parking spaces. The entrances should be reduced to one at either end, and the possibility of one way traffic should be examined.
4. The electric utility (NIPSCO) should be sent a set of plans to see if there is any opportunity for reducing or cleaning up some of the overhead lines.
5. The improvements should include a lakefront promenade and bicycle path adjacent to the lakefront, and intensive landscaping to soften the look of the new reconfigured parking area.
6. A family/child area should be considered, perhaps incorporating water features which tie in with the lake, along with an overlook and pier.
7. A set of drawings showing the construction proposed for Phase III should be on public display in a prominent location (i.e., City Hall, Bright Spot, Art Theater), to arouse interest and stimulate debate and support.

Recommendation

The Hobart downtown area has a bright future. The development of the lakefront has afforded the city an opportunity to build a truly unique feature that serves as a source of pride and offers a substantially higher level of recreational benefit to it's residents and visitors. It has offered a strong incentive and symbol to property owners in the downtown area to reinvest in their buildings. As such, the City should move forward when funding is available with the balance of Phase III. The city should help coordinate and fund the development of a common streetscape design, encourage the reinvestment of building owners to make improvements to signage and facade, and work towards combining and coordinating shared parking areas. In addition, the city should proceed with the public improvements aimed at improving the aesthetic look of the downtown area.