

Why Downtowns Matter

Our county has seen a historic trend in the last twenty years. Citizens are rediscovering the importance of downtowns. From the late 1940s to the late 1990s the movement was away from the central city hub into the suburbs. Downtowns declined and the once strong tax base of cities eroded. Populations in suburbs increased – but people became more isolated, it became quite easy to roll the car into the garage, close the garage door, turn on the television and forget that other people lived a few feet from you.

The movement away from the downtown as the center of commerce led to the development of malls and strip malls. While these grew in popularity – prominent downtown businesses – department stores, restaurants, hardware stores, flower shops, corner markets, and many mom and pop businesses were shuttered. Downtowns were deserted, property values plummeted, and public safety problems increased.

By the late 1980s many downtowns across the country were at a point where cities were considering razing entire blocks – vibrant downtowns were as dinosaurs rapidly becoming extinct. The loss of history, architecture and culture was tragic, but the loss of “community” downtowns offered was more tragic. People did not “gather” in downtown settings any longer. “Downtown” -the central hub of the city – where commerce, government, and congregational worship had their origin; where people came to share joy, hope, grief and life with one another was dying. Suburbs, malls, strip malls, and convenience stores could not offer the experience of community. Americans were becoming more isolated and more mistrustful of each other.

In the early 2000s a shift began to occur. This in part, was led by young people. Their desire to connect their discovery of urban verses suburban life became a driving force in the redevelopment of the downtowns of major cities. Smaller cities and towns began to follow this trend. Baby boomers who led the escape to the suburbs for fifty years, began to see the value and sense of community a downtown experience could offer.

Baby boomers perhaps longing for the “community experience” of their youth, and desirous of amenities now found in large cities, but weary from traffic congestion, discovered small cities like Winnsboro. It has been through their efforts and the efforts of other committed investors that downtown life in rural America began to redevelop. Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and now Generation Z are seeing the value and sense of community downtowns bring to their life experience. This force has become so powerful that we now see large retail development designed and built to resemble historic downtowns. We also see suburban housing developments designed like a small city with downtown like centers. It is good to see history repeat itself, but it is important to note that the driving force of this change is our need as humans to connect to one another.

Downtowns have been the center of life for thousands of years. Cities grow outwardly beginning with their downtowns. Humans are a social species and need each other to prosper physically, economically, emotionally, and spiritually. Downtowns have served as the geographic location for humans to “gather” and grow since the beginning of time. To ignore our downtowns and allow them to wither and die, is to allow our communities to grow stagnant and eventually loose population.

Downtowns not only connect us with the past and each other, they provide “quality of life.” Downtowns are the center of culture, arts, and entertainment. These take many forms – from antique car and rodeo parades, to festivals, museums, live music, art exhibits, farmer’s markets, and activities for children and families. Downtowns add great value to community life. Quality of life enhancements benefit the citizens of the community, but also serve to attract new citizens and businesses to the community. This translates into economic growth for the city. Quality of life enhancements also attract visitors. While visitors are attending our festivals or participating in our parades, or are enjoying a show at the Center for the Arts – they spend money in our community. This is commerce which helps our local businesses and our sales tax receipts.

One final word about the quality of life as it relates to downtowns and economic growth. Our wonderful city has approved a bond issue to build a much needed new high school which is complete with a career and technical education center. We as a community recognize the value this would add to the lives of our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren by enhancing their education and future employment opportunities. This is wonderful and must be done. The question I offer at this time is “Now that we as a community have taken steps to prepare future generations for higher education and employment, would we like them to return to Winnsboro to raise their families?” If the answer to that question is “YES!” then we must be willing to invest and provide them with a city that has good employment opportunities as well as a quality of life which includes the many of the amenities they can find in larger cities. A vibrant flourishing attractive downtown is perhaps the most critical factor in making this happen.

I often tell staff, council members, and colleagues that the decisions and actions we make and take are not simply for those living in our cities today – they are for the children,

grandchildren and great grandchildren of those here and those who may choose Winnsboro as their home. We are fortunate to have such a great community in which to live. Our downtown is part of what makes this city great! Supporting our downtown by supporting our merchants, arts, and future enhancements will make our community stronger and even greater!

Craig Lindholm
City Administrator
Winnsboro, Texas