



COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION CENTER

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WHAT YOU MUST KNOW BEFORE BEGINNING MAIN STREET REVITALIZATION

- ESSENTIAL
ELEMENTS
- OBSTACLES
- LEVERAGE POINTS

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TEN ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

These ten points are a compilation of what seem to be the essential ingredients for a revitalization project to get off the ground, and be an economic success.

1. **VISION** The community must have either a strong *identity* of its own or a *vision* of what it would like to become. The better this vision can be described in terms of realistic, concrete goals, the more likely the community is to be successful. What the community *values* is a core element - such as friendship, caring, beauty, education, prosperity, heritage, and so forth.
2. **DISSATISFACTION** Without strong sense of *concern* or dissatisfaction with problems of the community, any effort to revitalize will be met by apathy, resistance, and complacency. Complacency stifles new initiatives.
3. **CULTURAL ACTIVITY** Cultural events such as *ethnic festivals, celebrations, religious events, landmarks, and architectural sites* play a significant role in building the image of the community and creating an exciting and inspiring environment that attracts customers, investors, and new residents, while inspiring those who already leave in the community.
4. **MARKET POTENTIAL** Retail businesses along a commercial corridor are critical to sustain most urban communities. However, these businesses are doomed unless there is significant market potential in the area. Both a well executed market analysis and a properly aimed advertising campaign are the underpinnings of any economic revitalization effort.
5. **ENTREPRENEURS** Risk-taking businessmen must be available and prepared to make investments in both retail stores as well as residential development. This may require a program to seek out or train new businessmen and provide business packaging assistance.
6. **LEADERSHIP** Local residents and businessmen must provide the direction, organization and commitment for any effort. When leadership comes solely from the government, the project is likely to fail. And projects that overlook working with the surrounding residents are prone to conflict and stalemates.
7. **SUPPORT** Broad-based political support is necessary in order to bring both funding resources and government agency staffing assistance to bear on thorny technical and bricks-and-mortar problems. Full time professional support is likely to be necessary especially to assist and coordinate the large number

of community volunteers who eventually become involved in these programs.

8. **MONEY** Fund-raising, business investment, volunteer donations, and public money must be available for housing, small business developments, store-front improvements, roads, parks, and other physical improvements.
9. **TIME** Revitalization is not an overnight process. It involves changing people's attitudes and their decision-making patterns. It means construction and rehabilitating buildings. It requires many meetings and social events. Generally 3 - 5 years is a conservative estimate of the time necessary before enough momentum can be generated for the revitalization to be self-sustaining. Most people grossly underestimate the time necessary for this type of undertaking.
10. **PLAN** Without a strategic and systematic plan, efforts are likely to be haphazard and superficial. An effective plan should not copy another community's plan but should be designed to meet your unique needs, problems, and goals. The plan should have specific short-term goals as well as more general long term objectives. It should be time-oriented with milestones, but these should be flexible in order to adapt to new needs and changing energies over the long haul. The plan must insure that visual improvements are occurring every 3 - 6 months to serve as observable reminders of progress. And the plan must deal very carefully and explicitly with human dynamics of the neighborhood, because revitalization brings change, and change brings conflict, which is probably the most frequent cause of failure in neighborhood economic revitalization.

OBSTACLES

Neighborhood revitalization is an exciting and challenging task. But it also requires hard work and is loaded with difficulties and problems. Before beginning a revitalization project, you should mentally prepare yourself for the job. These are a few of the obstacles you can count on finding:

FRUSTRATION

Revitalization typically requires overcoming some very formidable political, economic, physical, and psychological obstacles, many of which cannot be surmounted easily. Businessmen often become frustrated, and even angry, with the apathy and lack of cooperation. And even when these problems are solved, new ones will undoubtedly arise. If you don't have a high tolerance for frustration, you should probably not get too involved in revitalization.

RESENTMENT

For a number of reasons, many of which will be unknown to you, some people will resent what you are doing, no matter how lofty the goal. Some may doubt your motivations, others will think they might lose power, and still others will fear the disruption that change will bring to their stable lives.

APATHY

Many people will be apathetic to your call for action, usually because they fear that they might fail. Older merchants may simply not have the energy to rekindle the dreams of their youth. Other merchants may simply be operating on a tight budget and need to devote all their time to their own businesses. And there is always one group of merchants whose businesses don't depend on the success of the shopping district, and who consequently don't care about the success or failure of the revitalization.

CONFLICT

Even if you conduct the revitalization in the most organized and participatory way, there is bound to be conflict among both residents and businessmen. Often it is due to different sets of values, the lack of trust, long-time animosities, or very different goals. But conflict is not bad, though it may be frustrating. Conflict is simply a sign that there is human energy to harness and channel into constructive activities.

OUTSIDE EXPERTS

Planners, consultants, and government staff can be an enormous help to your project -- if you know how to deal

with them. Otherwise they can tend to take over a project, providing the guidance and direction that only neighborhood leadership can and should provide. When outsiders lead the revitalization, resentment builds and the project will probably fail.

IMPOSSIBLE OBJECTIVES

All too often revitalization tries to start with grandiose, complex schemes that will turn the neighborhood into a showplace in several months. Generally these schemes are overly optimistic and when the objectives are not met, people become disappointed and drop-out. The solution is to start small, insure success, and enlarge the scope of the project when you have gained momentum and support.

POLITICAL INTERFERENCE

Revitalization usually relies on some amount of federal or city money. All money comes with strings attached and political money often brings all sorts of political interference. Be prepared to stand your ground and fight for the good of the neighborhood if necessary.

AMBIGUITY

Revitalization cannot be accomplished using a step-by-step, "cook-book" formula. It requires a certain amount of trial and error. You will often have to "fly by the seat of your pants". Frequently the whole program will hinge on some crucial issue, such as funding, and no one may be able to tell you if your grant proposal is going to be funded. Other times you will wonder where people stand with regard to a particular issue, and no one will speak out. If you are uncomfortable with this type of ambiguity, you may become disillusioned rather quickly.

"SNIPERS"

Invariably there will be people waiting for you to fail or make the wrong move. If and when they attack, hold your ground. But if you did make a mistake, be humble, admit the mistake, and move forward.

NEGATIVE ATTITUDES

The worst obstacle of a revitalization project are people who will not believe in your goal, who say it cannot be done, and who continually look for every fault in the plan. These negative attitudes are probably one of the strongest reasons why the neighborhood is presently declining. You cannot argue with someone to change their attitude, but listening to them often helps. Yet the best ways to change attitudes are:

- have the negative person begin to describe their goals or desires for the future of the community.
- show some concrete, visible signs of change.

LEVERAGE POINTS

Leverage points are those issues, individuals, and methods that can have the greatest influence on changing the way the neighborhood operates. The following suggestions reflect the extensive experiences of a number of people who have revitalized neighborhoods:

DOMINO EFFECT

Look for issues that may create a "domino effect", thereby causing a solution to several other problems.

This usually means getting some quick and visible victories that will help the revitalization movement gain momentum. The result of these visible changes often is a substantial change in people's attitudes toward their community, which in turn makes the revitalization occur more rapidly.

FOCUS ON STRENGTHS

Pick issues that are potential strengths in the community, especially where pride can be generated. Examples of potential strengths might be: Tapping into available leadership talent, focusing on the architecture of older buildings (even though they may be dilapidated), advertising the accessibility of parking, neighborhood ethnic festivals, advantageous geographic location on hillside, near water, near downtown, etc.

VISIBLE SYMBOLS

Choose issues that can become visible symbols of change. Clean up campaigns, removal of broken or obsolete signs, painting houses, and planting trees or flowers are examples of this.

COMMON GOOD

Concentrate on issues that are universally seen as "problems" (eye-sores, disappointments, something missing), and their resolution will be accepted by people as being in the "common good." This will encourage others to work for things larger than their own selfish interests.

ATTITUDES

The essence of Revitalization is the raising of the vitality - the human spirit - of a community (the common unity). Attitudinal and perceptual change is just as important as physical change. Positive, but realistic attitudes and beliefs change behavior, which produces positive results. Select issues that will begin to change attitudes. Cynical attitudes do more harm to a revitalization effort than any other single force. If a group tries to work on a problem such as "slum landlords" the community may only become more aware of the magnitude of the problem and their inability to have an effect on improving the situation, which will only make their negative attitude worse.

OPPORTUNITIES

Find the "opportunity side" of every problem.

Difficult situations usually present some sort of opportunity to rally people together to fight a common threat, or to prove cynics to be wrong, or to enact a long-needed piece of

legislation, etc. Discovering the opportunities associated with a problem will also spur a group toward creative solutions.

ALLIES & ALLIANCES

Regard every person or group as a potential ally.

If people are seen as enemies, you run the risk of creating a "self-fulfilling prophesy" where people actually begin to act like enemies. Also, it makes it all the more difficult for people who have been stereotyped as opponents to join your cause when they see the value of your program. (Note: coalitions tend to focus on short-term, single issue approaches, while alliances are more strategic and longer term.)

OPENNESS

Keep people informed about your goals, your values, and your strategies. Politicians, especially, have a tendency to fear the unknown. By letting your position be visible you allow others who disagree with your position to voice their opinions openly, which in turn allows you to make adjustments to your strategy in order to increase the chances for success. Hidden agendas destroy community effort.

ISSUES

It is critical to organize people around issues, not problems. An issue addresses a problem with a goal, a solution, and a strategy. The best issues are specific, immediate, and realizable, such as fixed up homes, more parking, clean streets, etc.

SLOGAN

A good slogan can be invaluable to your program. It serves as a rallying cry and becomes the symbol of many complex issues.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

When conflict occurs (and it will whenever a change is proposed), focus the conflict on the resolution of problems and away from personalities. Also, don't let people polarize their positions (right and wrong, or good and bad), because you might make it too difficult for them to change their minds even after they realize that our idea was right.

AVOID MAJOR REFORM

Avoid making major reform in the community the initial step toward revitalization. Attempting to change the political system implementing new laws (such as sign codes, historic district zoning, etc.) confronting bureaucratic apathy, etc. causes people to polarize and fight, which only makes the problem more difficult to solve. Changes like these should only be attempted after revitalization has gained momentum and after a healthy climate of cooperation, community confidence, and trust has occurred.

STABILITY

Stay away from issues that will cause the relocation of people, the change in cultural, social, or religious patterns, or the demolition of buildings. Our world is changing so fast that people easily become confused. They look toward their neighborhood as a stabilizing force in their lives. To change their habits -- where they buy their groceries, where their friends

live, etc. -- will only be successful if people are now dissatisfied with their habits. Without this dissatisfaction, people will strongly resist such changes. By the same token, older buildings, no matter how deteriorated, have become the symbols of continuity in people's lives. It is better to find ways to rehabilitate or restore these buildings, than to destroy them, because the destruction of people's life patterns.

CRISIS

Often it becomes difficult to mobilize people's energy unless there is a crisis. When a crisis occurs, people are more willing to attend meetings and take bold action. Frequently, a common problem can become a crisis as soon as people call it a crisis.

AVOID CREATING ARDENT AVERSARIES

Avoid creating adversary relationships. If adversary parties begin to emerge, it is likely that nothing will change because the adversaries will simply neutralize each other. To avoid adversary relations, it is important to begin tackling common problems and to foster a climate of cooperation. The most effective method of fostering a cooperative climate is to allow those affected by the change to have an input into the planning and problem solving process.

BEGIN WITH THE SHORT TERM

Long term or expensive projects are usually poor issues upon which to begin a revitalization effort. Because revitalization projects depend heavily upon the efforts of volunteers in the community, a series of short term successes is a better approach, because people can work in spurts. Long term projects require the continuous support of a large number of people, many of whom do not have the time, the patience, or the ability. Projects that require a great deal of financing should be planned only if the money to implement the project is readily available. Also, avoid projects that will cost the local government a lot of money; these projects usually mean that a lot of debate will occur at the Council level, and taxes might be raised, which causes a great deal of built-in, rapid opposition.

MAINTAIN MOMENTUM

There will be many obstacles, objections, and delays. Have enough initiatives going simultaneously, so that, if you are blocked on one initiative, you are showing results on another, gaining confidence and visible results of the dream.

AWARENESS OF THE LOSS

When people are made aware of the specific things they will lose if they fail to take action, minor miracles can occur. Without revitalization, people can lose their homes, their financial security, their friends, their stores, or their very way of life.

CELEBRATE VICTORIES

People want to be acknowledged for their efforts, for having made a difference. Be sure to celebrate, acknowledge, and embrace a sense of community achievement. It's a team effort; don't let anyone hog the spotlight for long.