

## DOWNTOWN HURDLES

by Kennedy Smith

*Adapted from the Planning Commissioners Journal*

About 15 years ago I met a Massachusetts couple who had owned a successful car audio business, selling and installing car sound systems. Their business had been successful because they sent installers out to their customers, rather than doing installations in a central shop. Customers loved it – the installers came right to them, so they didn't have to give up their cars for a day. The installers kept their vans at their own homes, so the business didn't need a dedicated parking area for its small fleet. All it needed was a showroom. So, when the right space opened, the couple jumped at the opportunity. Things were great for a couple of months. Sales skyrocketed, and the shop's salespeople loved being close to restaurants and stores.

But then someone from the town's planning office stopped by and delivered a stunning blow. He told them the town's zoning code didn't permit automotive businesses downtown, and they would have to move. Why, they asked? Because they owned a fleet of vans, he said. They explained that their vans weren't kept downtown, so their business had no impact on the district's parking supply, and it wasn't the kind of automotive business that generated pollution or toxic waste. But the planner said it didn't matter: their business was classified as 'automotive,' and that wasn't allowed downtown. The couple closed their business, sold their home, and moved to a different town.

While rehabbing buildings and improving public spaces is important to downtowns, downtown revitalization actually takes place in a community's planning and land use laws. If the community's planning policies don't encourage a vibrant downtown, all these activities will have limited long-term impact and the district will face a tough uphill battle. To be sure, there are dozens of ways in which planning policies negatively affect downtowns. Among the most significant problems:

### 1. Comprehensive plans that treat downtown like a detail, not like a priority.

If having a thriving downtown is important to your community, that goal should be at the heart of your comprehensive plan. It shouldn't be just a component of the plan; it should be a guiding principle that pervades the entire plan and affects most aspects of it. An obstacle to downtown revitalization is simply an incentive for development to take place somewhere else. Your community's comprehensive plan should make downtown the easiest and most advantageous place for new development to occur. The community's values about design, land use, and economic development should cross-cut all aspects of the comp plan and shape all its components accordingly.

### 2. Codes that make mixed-use development difficult.

Downtowns work best when they have a mix of economic functions – housing, offices, retail, entertainment, government, small industry. But zoning often makes it difficult or impossible to create that blend of activities. Just some quick examples:

- Zoning codes sometimes prohibit the use of the upper floors above storefronts for apartments. This is at odds with the goal of having more people live downtown, and precludes a housing option that is appealing to a growing number of people.
- Zoning requirements for parking spaces required for downtown apartments or condominiums are often based on the number required for detached housing in residential neighborhoods. This may far exceed the number actually needed for downtown housing units, whose residents are more likely to walk, bike, or use public transit than to drive a car. As a result, developers have to face the extra costs of providing unneeded parking.

### 3. Codes that prohibit small-scale industry from locating downtown.

The fastest-growing business sector in small-city downtowns in the past decade has been what I call "location neutral" businesses – businesses that, because of overnight delivery systems and the internet, can locate almost anywhere. But many communities' zoning regulations still define these businesses as "industrial" and don't permit them downtown (or permit them only after an additional level of review). It is critical that these kind of zoning definitions be updated to reflect how businesses actually operate today.

Development dollars are like water; they flow to the path of least resistance. If planning commissions take the lead in making downtown the most enticing place for development to occur, investment will follow.

## Upcoming Events

### ACCG 2009 Legislative Conference & Training

February 9-10, 2009—Atlanta, GA

For more information visit [www.accg.org](http://www.accg.org)

### Southeast Local Government Technology Conference

February 10, 2009—Duluth, GA

For more information visit [www.atlantaregional.com](http://www.atlantaregional.com)

### North Georgia GPA Planners Luncheon

February 11, 2009—Cartersville, GA

For more information visit [www.georgiaplanning.org](http://www.georgiaplanning.org)

### Community Planning Academy:

#### Training for Planning Officials

February 19, March 11, April 16, 2009—Atlanta, GA

For more information visit

[www.atlantaregional.com/communityplanningacademy](http://www.atlantaregional.com/communityplanningacademy)

### Newly Elected Officials Institute

February 20-22, 2009—Athens, GA

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