

## Economic Restructuring in the Downtown

When a town gets together to revitalize there is always a lot of discussion concerning they want to accomplish and how they want to move forward with any number of projects. When the projects start moving ahead there is a sudden realization concerning what they really want, that is economic restructuring. In the beginning the question always arises just what is really economic restructuring and what can be done to effectuate it. If in the initial stages, the group simplified economic restructuring to be too general it could present a problem.

The part about economic restructuring that one has to realize is that it is really the sum of all the points of the four point main street strategy working together as a whole. The strategy concerning economic restructuring is a blend much more than the other points because economic restructuring is often considered the end result. It is also the most difficult to define.

When I was in DuBois PA as the Main Street Manager one of the economic restructuring goals and objectives was to maintain the Commonwealth's LCB store in the downtown. Anyone who has had any dealings with the LCB knows that it is not a small task. In fact, I have lost LCB state stores in most of the downtowns in which I have worked. The idea in DuBois was to continue the current lease in the current location and get the store to re-up on a new lease. I arranged a meeting with representatives of the LCB and they straightforwardly stated that they were on a one-way street that went the wrong way (which was true). They wanted us to change the way the street traffic went in order to secure their continued presence in the downtown.

This request by the LCB brought forth the conversation of a new streetscape for the first time. The new streetscape involved a grant (CDBG) and some serious design elements. When a streetscape was done it was considered a design point and not an economic restructuring point as it has nothing to do with the building adaptive reuse or use...but in this case it was somewhat connected. We did all that was asked of us and secured the grant and widened the one-way street to make it two ways. Problem was the LCB was shooting hot air in our direction and they moved the store out to the DuBois Mall area anyway. So we got some design work complete and we got the street direction changed so you could go down it from route 219 but we lost an anchor we could not replace.

I like to look at moving real estate sales forward as a way to work on economic restructuring. It is hard to work with property owners that do not want to do the necessary improvements to make the store viable. Many times the stores in the downtown need a fresh coat of paint or a reasonable bathroom for the storeowners and employees to use. If a property owner has owned a building for a long time he or she will think that, "it is what it is", and rent it as is. The best way to deal with these owners is to get them to sell the property and get someone in there that wants to make an investment in the community. The new owners will need to make the stores more rentable and have some sort of game plan concerning a rental strategy.

I call this strategy the "monopoly strategy" inasmuch as you ask the person if the property is for sale, get a price and shop the property (this worked well in Phoenixville).

You need not be a realtor to market properties if you are a revitalization coordinator. You are not writing up the legal papers but instead making contacts with people that come to you that are looking for property or space and being a matchmaker...a facilitator of sorts.

Another economic restructuring item in DuBois was the Pershing Hotel re-use. The hotel had a topless dancing bar on the first floor coupled with a real nice theatre that ran lascivious movies and a massage parlor in the rooms above the bar. It was a classic den of iniquity. One of the other economic restructuring goals was to change that hotel complex over to something more compatible to the town's vision of proper use. I tried playing monopoly and was able to find a buyer who was willing to buy the property. We ended the nonsense that was going on there. But really it was a case of watch out what you ask for because it might come true.

DuBois was the epicenter of prime hunting ground. Every December there would be a herd of hunters that would descend on DuBois making it a truly Merry Christmas for the merchants. They were spending money in the shops, eating in the restaurants and basically raising hell after days hunting and a few lonely nights in hunting camp with minimal amenities. When the hunters arrived in town they could take in a movie downtown, have a beer at the bar and then potentially relax with a great massage conveniently located in the hotel rooms above the bar. It was truly a hunter's oasis.

The first year the bar was closed they still came and hung out but a lot of them looked at the former bar storefront that now housed an upscale gift shop and wondered why. The second year less hunters came downtown and by the third year nary a hunter was to be found. The economic restructuring goal was complete, although we had completely wiped out the foot traffic during those two weekends in December.

There was mass discontent with me, the board, and with the whole program in general by some of the merchants. Although they had hailed the move when it happened, as they were glad to rid themselves of the seedy element...they failed to recognize that the impact it had during the two weeks before Christmas. That traffic was never coming back no matter what you did...even if you reopened the sin complex you would never fully recover from 3 years when you did not offer the activity. That tradition of heading to DuBois to get drunk and have a good time was done and there was nothing that was going to bring it back.

The overall effort helped eliminate some of the problematic people that used to hang out downtown during the rest of the year. We were credited with "cleaning up" the town but it was always qualified by the acknowledgement of the loss of the Christmas revenue. It did allow a different element to visit the downtown and they came as regular people wanting to do regular things.

The merchants embarked on a new effort at Christmas time that involved a Christmas parade and tree lighting and things got better. The good people of DuBois were not afraid to bring their wives and daughters into an area that was not considered safe for women and risky for men...was it worth it? Opinions varied and since that was like 1988 I am sure no one remembers. The hotel has long been demolished and the community has accepted the downtown a little better. Economic restructuring goals can lead to change.

When there is change sometimes people get upset. Sometimes the change creates the desired affect and some time it does not. It is hard to predict if everyone will love or hate the change You can never actually know what the change will bring until you unleash the change. Make no mistake about it, restructuring is change. You will be changing the economics of the downtown. When thinking about what changes you want to make...be sure they are well thought out because there are seldom do-overs.