

Going downtown

Districts seen as plus, but not by all

Good downtowns may not raise residential property values. But shoddy downtowns can have a blighting effect on a community.

Some cities nourish their downtowns. Others consider downtown vaguely important but see no need to pamper them.

Those pictures emerge from a survey of editors, city managers and planners in two dozen communities.

DOWNTOWN'S IMPORTANCE

Local governments appear to have four different attitudes toward downtown business districts:

1. Downtowns need city help and promotion.
2. Downtowns are important focal points for image, cultural activity and attractiveness to residents.
3. Downtowns aren't very important.
4. Downtown is a drag on community resources.

HELP, PROMOTION

Ideally, Birmingham (population 19,997) would like city promotion of its central business district, which provides 30 percent of the property tax base. But City Manager Thomas Markus said it can't be done with current tight budgets.

State Sen. Michael Bouchard, R-Birmingham, is pushing a package of bills to allow local units to make levies on business for promotion.

In Plymouth (9,560), City Manager Steve Walters said downtown is (1) a source of commerce, (2) an entertainment and cultural center and (3) a source of taxes. "Business sends your kids to school," he said.

Walters' record in Northville (6,226) and St. Ignace shows he believes in making downtown physically attractive with waterfront promenades, benches, flowers and trees.

Southfield (76,728) has no downtown, but its tax base is 66.7 percent commercial and office, and city hall lets people know who's paying the bills. Minrod Rosenthal, director of community relations, said the city:

- Produces a videotape which it plays on cable Ch. 8 7-8 p.m. at budget time and is available to any group.
- Puts 50 pages of exhibits in its budget book.
- Mails a newsletter to residents that includes news of business as well as municipal activity.

Northville has constant events downtown or near it. Some have a commercial side: the May flower show, "Summer Song" with musicians strolling closed streets, the weekly Farmers' Market in the race track parking lot, the Tivoli Fair celebrating the historical society. Some are just civic events that generate visitors: the Victorian Festival walking tours, parades on both Memorial Day and the Fourth, live theater, the annual Bluegrass Festival, the Santa parade.

Northville's new city manager, Gary Word, said a healthy tax base is 50-50 or 60-40 residential to non-residential. He said industrial development generally has a more positive impact on the local economy than commercial.

Novi City Manager Ed Kriewall would calculate the importance of downtown (or a mall) by taking the property tax revenue and subtract-



Sidewalk sales are a popular summertime event in area downtowns. Rochester sidewalk sales, shown here, draw thousands of shoppers from the tri-county area.

ing the revenue it would produce if developed for residential. Twelve Oaks alone increased city revenue by 15-20 percent.

FOCAL POINT

In smaller towns and incorporated townships, downtown is important more culturally and esthetically, and there's little talk of municipal promotion.

Northville manager Word said his downtown is more than a commercial or civic center. Its "quaintness" makes it almost a tourist attraction, "and the people spend money in Northville."

South Lyon (5,857) City Manager Rodney Cook: "If you don't have a viable downtown, people don't take pride in the city."

Brighton (4,300) City Manager Dana Foster, who started last month, "Survey residents who just moved to town or located here for business. I'm sure they'd tell you that the fact that Brighton has a lively and attractive downtown helped convince them to move here. It attracted me."

Sources in this category were fond of sneering, sometimes directly, at Novi with its Twelve Oaks Mall. Their tones of voice equate Novi (32,998) socially with Ecorse or Zug Island.

But some shopping centers — such as Twelve Oaks and Somerset — generate more cultural activities, entertainment and exhibits than do downtowns.

Rochester (7,130) City Manager Ken Johnson: The economic impact of the CBD is just not an issue. This older city's breakdown: 50 percent residential, 40 percent commercial, 10 percent industrial — indicating things are going well without official attention.

Rochester has used a downtown development authority since the early 1980s, capturing a portion of downtown taxes for business development and downtown beautification.

Farmington DDA Director Wendy Strip-Sittsamer said downtowns provide "a central meeting place."

"Downtowns are not just collections of old buildings they're gathering places for people."

Farmington's downtown, she said, has seen a near-doubling of standard assessed valuation since the DDA began in 1986.

NOT IMPORTANT

The metropolitan view: Westland (84,724) was incorporated from the remains of Nankin Township after two other cities had taken chunks of it and Livonia threatened to gobble the best of the rest.

Since 1965, Westland's center has been Westland Center (anchored by Hudson's) and the area surrounding it. Despite the lack of a Main Street, city economic development director Scott Velhuis said, "A strong CBD is generally an indicator of a strong community."

Troy — like Livonia (100,850), Southfield and Novi — has no down-

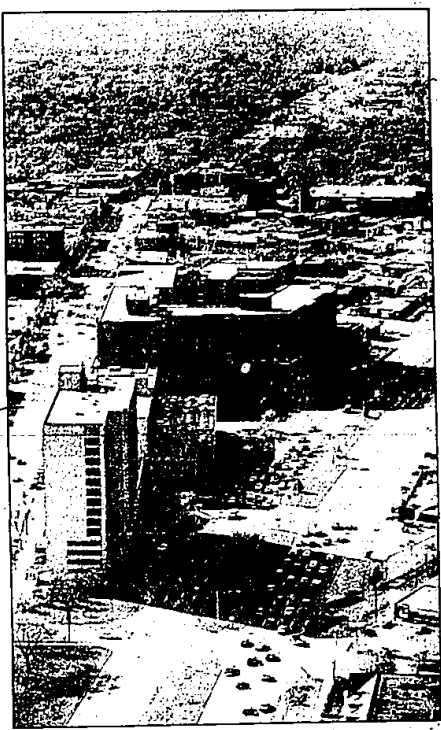
town but lots of businesses. Troy (72,884) realizes their importance as tax generators, particularly for schools. City Manager Frank Gerstenecker: "If values of a CBD remain constant or decline, the cost of operating schools would also have to decline, or property taxes would go up."

Rochester Hills (61,766) was incorporated from Avon Township, surrounding the old city of Rochester. Since its 1984 incorporation, it has seen growth not only in industry, but also in strip malls and mom and pop variety stores. Hills Mayor Billie Ireland sees no direct relationship between the business district and residential district. The farther away the home is from a business, the less the home is affected by business.

Canon Township (57,040), south of Plymouth, has lots of chain firms on Ford Road. Supervisor Tom Yack talks about a "commercial section" rather than downtown. A thriving business section contributes to the image of community and its residential resale values, he said.

Beverly Hills (10,610) Village Manager George Majoros said local businesses are few and need little help from local government. Most residents shop on the Southfield Road strip. In 1987 the village orchestrated an improvement project on Southfield Road — storm sewers (closing open ditches) and paving the shoulders, a women's club donated \$17,000 for plantings, a special assessment/district charges businesses for maintenance.

Bloomfield Township (42,473) is 95 percent residential. Supervisor Fred Korzon sees the national and state economic climates as more important than local business. The township surrounds the cities of Birmingham and Bloomfield Hills.



Downtown Birmingham provides a mix of stores, offices, apartment buildings, restaurants and hotels, helping make Birmingham one of the area's most prestigious mailing addresses.



Revitalization is the watchword in downtown Farmington. This photo, taken in 1988, shows workers laying out a grid of wires for new downtown lighting. Farmington, like Rochester, has

adopted a Downtown Development Authority to finance and implement improvements.

'Downtowns are not just collections of old buildings. They're gathering places for people.'
— Wendy Strip-Sittsamer
Farmington DDA Director

\$75 In Free Kinder-Checks.

Now you can have \$75 in free Kinder-Checks for the fall season. This is a special offer for the children of KinderCare. Each child will receive one Kinder-Check. The Kinder-Check is a special check that can be used for a variety of purchases. It is good for one year. The Kinder-Check is a special check that can be used for a variety of purchases. It is good for one year.

Enroll Now For Fall at your KinderCare Center

1991 KinderCare Learning Centers, Inc.

Oriental Express
FURNITURE OUTLET

SUMMER CLEARANCE SALE
10-50% OFF Retail Prices

Fish pots • Curios
Porcelain • Floor screens
Cabinets • Vase stands
Bedroom sets & More

408 S. Lafayette • Royal Oak • 541-2722
Tue.-Sat. 10-6; Sun. 12-4; Closed Mondays

CHAMBERWORKS

Victoria Hattom and Mary Richards, violin
Paul Willington, viola
Thomas M. Kuros, baritone
with assisting artists

A Celebration of Antonio Vivaldi

Opus III: L'Estro Armonico

Four Local Community Performances of the Vivaldi Concertos for One, Four Violins, Strings and basso continuo
to be given on the following dates:

Sunday, September 15, 1991
4:00 p.m.

Sunday, September 22, 1991
4:00 p.m.

Christ Church Cranbrook
470 Church Road
Bloomfield Hills
(corner of Chamberworks and Long Pine Roads)
general admission \$10
seniors and students \$8
Tickets at the door or call 624-7788

Michigan Council for the Arts

LAST CHANCE

bryant

INSTALLED FOR AS LOW AS **\$1390**

Model 590

THAT'S RIGHT FLAME FURNACE IS CLEARING AWAY THEIR AFFORDABLE BRYANT MODEL 590 AIR CONDITIONERS. DON'T WAIT UNTIL NEXT SEASON WHEN YOU CAN SAVE BIG NOW.

FREE ESTIMATES AND EASY FINANCING AVAILABLE.

FLAME
FURNACE COMPANY SINCE 1949

40 YEARS

DETROIT 527-1700 WARREN 574-1070 TROY 524-1700 LIVONIA 427-1700