

George E. Bratcher Jr.: City on right path with downtown strategy

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As a small-business owner for 22 years in Battle Creek, an appraiser who works throughout the United States, as well as a former city assessor, I wish to voice strong support for the downtown transformation effort, including the blight reduction initiative.

Downtown redevelopment across the country generally consists of wishful thinking and "build it and they will come" mentality. In too many cities, they build it and they don't come. My experience is that vibrant downtowns have job centers (such as governmental) which drive the economics of the downtown. Downtowns that do not have strong job centers are not vibrant and in my experience cannot be made vibrant. A critical mass of jobs must be present to support revitalization.

The present effort to leverage the Kellogg development and the Food Safety Institute jobs into a viable downtown is better grounded in the real world, and has a great chance for success. To achieve a vibrant downtown with a healthy tax base, the city and Battle Creek Unlimited need to continue their efforts to leverage existing jobs into new jobs. These larger developments can create interest in the downtown and have the potential to draw other businesses to the downtown.

In my view, Battle Creek Unlimited and the city are also right on target with their present claims that deteriorating, vacant and blighted buildings cost more in municipal services and they negatively affect the tax base of the areas in which they are situated.

Federal law requires that each appraisal we perform include a neighborhood analysis. Estimating a property's value necessitates a comprehensive view of factors, including the surrounding environs. Negative characteristics in that environment tend to diminish the values of those nearby properties. One poorly maintained building affects all others in the area. Vacant buildings tend to deteriorate, and they can become settings for illegal behavior.

The blight reduction initiative, whereby resources

are focused on the most salvageable facilities, is grounded in reality which has been little recognized in downtown redevelopment theory.

In particular, we need to focus resources on the most significant facilities (i.e. Heritage Tower) while taking other less significant, obsolete structures out of the marketplace. Many of these buildings cannot be made to function and compete with newer, more efficient office and retail space.

Having worked in many downtowns, I can say that they are all different, but they are relentless reflections of a community. The presence of vacant buildings and blight gives rise to negative feelings about safety and well-being, which make it more difficult to attract business and jobs which are needed to build the critical mass necessary for real redevelopment.

Our downtown is now being visited by people from all over the world as part of the Kellogg and Food Safety Institute development. A bright, lively and safe downtown is the best way to sustain this new traffic. The best way to a bright, lively and safe downtown is a clean, safe and well-maintained downtown.

I think, with the present strategy, we are on our way to real downtown redevelopment.

George E. Bratcher Jr., MAI, ASA, is a former Battle Creek city assessor.