

Organizing for Revitalization

Most towns in Pennsylvania have, at one time or another, organized for revitalization of the downtown. Sometimes revitalization happens and sometimes it does not. The problem with if it does not happen is that many years pass before it is tried again.

Each attempt will have its origins in a group of people with diverse backgrounds and varying skill sets. The direction of the group is often swayed by the prejudices both good and bad to different parts of the revitalization puzzle.

In DuBois PA the President of one of the main banks in town was firmly against historic restoration and initially drew the revitalization away from historic façade rehabilitation. In Lock Haven there were people who only wanted to concentrate on promotions as if everything else did not exist.

It is important that there is a well-rounded committee to steer the revitalization. Usually there should be an accountant, attorney, architect, district merchants, a banker, and some people from the community. It is important that the people selected for the revitalization community have some ties to the community to help them interpret need.

If all of the four points are represented on the board, (promotion, design, economic restructuring, and organization) the committee will have a healthy counterbalance to people who wish to exclude a full 4 point program. There will always be vocal people and many times, they are somewhat intimidating depending upon their rank in a community.

Who should some of the at-large members be? I have found that members of the hospital board are usually in tune with the direction and the well being of the community. Institution members like insurance agents, bankers, and administrators sometimes add flavor to the board and offer insight into their interactions to the revitalization process.

There are some conflicting thoughts concerning having people who will interact with your revitalization coordinator on a staff level. I never believed it was good to put the chamber of commerce director on the board, instead a member of the chamber of commerce board should be appointed. You should not put your director or coordinator in an inferior position to the chamber staff person. This is particularly true in the more rural areas where resources are scarce.

There are also a couple of theories of thought concerning the use of politicians and government administrative staff. If they are on the board, they can announce their plans or endorse your plans, either way it is a tricky thing depending upon the level of political support this person has been entrusted. What you do not want is someone to engage in a political dispute through the committee. That is not to say that the board should not be avant garde or bold in the approach but should be wary of political initiatives by the board members who have a political agenda

The issue concerning government administrative staff is the same issue as the chamber director. These people are the peers of the revitalization coordinator and not their boss. This is an important point. You cannot hamstring your revitalization coordinator by limiting their ability to deal on a peer-to-peer basis. This question has always come up in the DCED site visits when the city or borough controls the program though making the revitalization coordinator staff.

When I worked on the DCED site review of Norristown's revitalization program when they were in the main street program. We saw that the planning department employ and control the revitalization coordinator. We stressed that this was not a good situation after interviews with the business people and the chamber of commerce. At the time, the state did not look favorably upon those kinds of arrangements.

The "right" people to serve on the board is often a challenge considering that many people are drawn to a revitalization. It is hard to access a person's interest in the process during the initial stages. Some people are flash in the pan members, meaning that they talk a good game but are short on results.

I remember being in DuBois and having someone come forward to chair a key committee and never doing it. There were always excuses concerning why the meetings never happened and what a heavy workload or childcare load of which the person was saddled. It is difficult to replace some of these members because of the inter-personal issues on the board. I usually give them the 3-meeting rule..."if ya haven't showed up to 3 straight meetings there needs to be a new chairman of that committee."

Everyone experiences time issues relating to their personal life interacting with volunteer work. Many times a quiet meeting with them to tell them that there needs to be more proactive action by the committee is enough for some to be inspired to lead the effort.

The key is to be diverse, do not let one personality dominate or do the lion share of the work. Everyone needs to be respectful of everyone else's ideas and thoughts and seek to work as a group. It is not easy...but it certainly is not rocket science but it is the most important part of the program.