

Recipes for Downtown Success: What are Other Towns Doing to Revitalize Their Main Streets? Three Small Cities Share Their Success Stories

John McGauley Nov 13, 2017 Updated Nov 13, 2017

1 of 2



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They struggled through some rough times, these downtowns, about sixty years of them.

First, supermarkets arrived in the 50s and 60s and swept away the old mom-and-pop markets, produce stores and butcher shops. Then, in the 70s the shopping strips were built, and more stores fled these downtowns — the shoe stores, pharmacies and women's and men's clothing emporiums. In the 80s, the malls came along and pummeled them further, then the big box stores such as Wal-Mart and Home Depot delivered the coup de grace. Residents moved out, and the apartments that remained fell into disrepair.

Empty storefronts and offices blighted their downtowns like missing front teeth mar a person's appearance. Companies closed down, or moved to outlying areas, compounding an already dire situation, giving everything a shabby and threadbare appearance.

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This is a look at how three towns, actually small cities, have resurrected their old, tired downtowns. They are all still works in progress, but there is evidence that their efforts, and investments, are already paying significant dividends.

The three were selected for the following reasons: 1) geographic diversity, 2) all are about the same size as Keene, Brattleboro or Peterborough, with county populations of similar size, 3) all three have colleges, as does Keene, and 4) most importantly, all are located far away from big metropolitan areas, as we in the Monadnock Region find ourselves. All the cities must fend for themselves, and rely on their own inventiveness and enterprise.

Their stories may provide some insights on how to revitalize our downtowns.

Quincy, Illinois: Residential First

This city of 40,000 is located 130 miles northwest of St. Louis, on the westernmost edge of Illinois. It is a fairly remote town, situated on the eastern banks of the mile-wide Mississippi River. Its better-known sister city, in Missouri, about 15 miles downriver, is Hannibal, which Mark Twain made famous. Hannibal is about the size of Brattleboro.

Quincy's economy is doing well, because some of its major employers, many of them tied to the huge agri-business sector, are enjoying prosperous times, and several key companies are expanding. The city, like Keene, is a major medical hub, with Quincy Medical Group employing about 1,000 doctors, nurses and technicians, and its 3,000-employee Blessing Medical System serving 300,000 people in a largely rural area, with a central hub in Quincy and 13 satellite medical centers.

However, Quincy's population has decreased by about 5,000 people in the past 30 years, primarily due to the growth of areas outside its city limits, and its downtown has struggled for years. Its riverfront is tired-looking and largely dormant, a concern to the downtown officials. The city's downtown nexus is Washington Park, rimmed with many beautiful buildings constructed in the architectural styles popular from 1870 to 1900. The park itself has historical significance, as it was the site of one of the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates. (Quincy's more recent claim to fame is that it was the home of Father Augustus Tolton, a former slave who became the first African-American Catholic priest in the United States and is now in the process of being canonized as a saint by the Vatican.)

"We're starting to see a real regeneration of downtown," says Bruce Guthrie, executive director of what is simply called The District, which is the organization of business owners and volunteers that is responsible for the development of the city's downtown area.

"We're a unique town; there are not very many cities in Illinois that are this big, and this isolated, in such a strategic area. We have a wonderful economy, a great airport, and we're building five new elementary schools." (Quincy voters in 2014 overwhelmingly supported an \$89 million bond issue for the schools.)

"Volunteers are the key to our efforts," Guthrie says, with dozens of committees assigned various tasks in planning. It has also recently hired a city planning consultant from St. Louis to assist in a new plan for future growth of Quincy's downtown.

Although Quincy's downtown promoters do many of the things that most downtown groups do — promotions and events to bring people downtown, economic development efforts and preservation of the area — its priority now is attracting young residents to downtown apartments and loft condominiums, says Guthrie. The city has recently made that easier by providing tax incentives and low-cost loans to landlords and developers who renovate or build loft apartments on the second floors of the buildings downtown.

So far that effort has created 15 new apartments and condominiums in the core downtown area, admittedly a small start, but an important one, he says, and this coming year a dozen more landlords have applied for the loans.

"I get phone calls every week from people who are transferred to Quincy, they don't want the traditional suburb, they want a loft, they want to be able to leave their door front and walk to lunch or dinner."

Dovetailing with that effort is the successful campaign to attract restaurants, taverns, and coffee shops to the downtown footprint, he says, with 20 new businesses and restaurants opening in the past two years.

Quincy also features what is called a Tax Increment Financing Program (TIF) which is a method of funding public investment in an area slated for development by capturing, for a time, all of the increased tax revenue that may result if the redevelopment stimulates private investment. As private investments add to the tax base within the redevelopment area, the increased tax revenues are placed in a special fund that can only be used for public purposes permitted by law.

Guthrie explains that the concentration is on the second-floors of these buildings because The District has 95 percent occupancy on the first floors of the buildings in its footprint.

"Our saying is 'residential first,' we want more people living downtown."

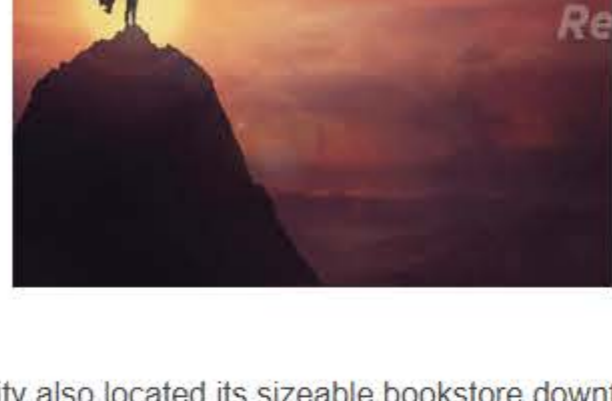
Greencastle, Indiana: Alums Who Care

This town of 14,000 is located about an hour west of Indianapolis, and the noticeable hallmark of the city is that it is home to DePauw University, a prestigious and wealthy liberal arts college, with a half-billion-dollar endowment. But it also has a diversified commercial base, with a major Wal-Mart distribution center and several major companies associated with the automotive industry, as well as a healthy agri-business sector, as does Quincy.

Like many towns of its size in the Midwest, the building stock in its downtown area is made up primarily of structures built during the period of 1870 to 1920.

The three prongs of the revitalization effort for Greencastle are these: an aggressive former mayor who led the campaign to bring various influential parties together; the award of a \$19 million State of Indiana downtown redevelopment grant in 2011; and the infusion of significant development investment by wealthy alumni and board members of DePauw University that has led to many renovated buildings that now are the home to businesses, restaurants and bars.

The city is in many ways a stereotypical-looking Midwest town, with the county courthouse dominating its downtown square. The university is located very close to Greencastle's downtown, and alums have bought most of the properties lining the corridor between the university and its downtown, investing millions into renovations of the old buildings.



Several years ago, the university also located its sizeable bookstore downtown. A Starbucks franchise arrived next to the bookstore, and now it is the top-grossing Starbucks franchise in the state. One DePauw alum is soon to open a four-story restaurant and events center on the downtown square, in a renovated building. Also, the city has recently spent \$2.5 million on new parking facilities.

"The stars came together," says Sue Murray, the former mayor of Greencastle who deftly aligned influential citizens with DePauw University leadership to see that the downtown was revived.

"(DePauw) Trustees have purchased properties and created an exciting climate. The city has issued 10 new liquor licenses, and other organizations are taking part in the downtown development, and now we have (property) owners who are truly invested in the downtown," she says.

The purpose of the revitalization effort, according to Murray, is to attract the rural residents of the region to Greencastle, for dining and entertainment, and to provide a comfortable and enticing environment for DePauw students. DePauw alumni are extremely loyal to the institution, Murray says, and a revitalized downtown provides them with even more reason to return to campus frequently.

North Adams, Massachusetts: Art Holds the Key

This town is much closer to home for the Monadnock Region, and reflects the ups and downs — but mostly downs — of small New England cities that suffered from depopulation because of the demise of most of the manufacturing capacity in the region in a long, downward slide that began after World War II. It is located in the Berkshire region of Massachusetts, one of the least populated areas of the state. The New York Times once called North Adams "a no-luck town with no future."

But, North Adams now holds a few aces in its hand, and they have led the way to the revitalization of this city's downtown. One of them is the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, now the largest such contemporary art museum of its kind in the nation, housed in an old factory that closed in 1985.

The other is the Clark Art Institute in nearby Williamstown. Between the two of them, about a half-million visitors come to North Adams. The Clark, opened in 1955, is located only six miles from the North Adams museum and is considered one of the best comprehensive classical art museums in the country.

"The MASS MoCA (the museum's popular moniker) is key to North Adams," says Valerie Hall, executive director of the North Adams Partnership, the organization responsible for the development of the city.

Since the museum opened in 1999, it has been part of a larger economic transformation in the region based on cultural, recreational and educational offerings. The city's downtown now is home to several new restaurants, contemporary art galleries and cultural organizations. Also, once-closed area factories and mills have been renovated into lofts for artists.

But, regardless of those two significant draws to town, Hall says there is much to do in terms of promotion for the city, which is why much effort is spent on special events, including concerts such as what's called "Free Grass," an annual bluegrass music festival, and the Eagle Street Beach Party, an annual event where sand is trucked in and residents enjoy a beach holiday.

"Tourism is our big focus right now," Hall says, with a combination of attracting those who come for the museums, and those who come for other recreational activities such as biking and hiking.

The town is also planning for another new museum, this one focusing on architecture, to be designed by the famous national architect Frank Gehry. Also in the planning stage is a national museum for model trains.

COMMONALITIES

There are a number of common denominators among the three cities.

- **Fires.** All have experienced fires. Quincy's old Newcombe Hotel, a mainstay in its downtown, burned to the ground in 2013, started by an arsonist. That same year a large conflagration heavily damaged four buildings on Greencastle's downtown square. North Adams has experienced a series of fires in the past couple of years, some of them suspicious in nature. (Brattleboro, too, was afflicted by a huge fire in its downtown, when in 2011 the Brooks Building burned, gutting a significant part of its shopping and restaurant district.)
- **Crime.** This is a concern in all the cities, as is the opioid crisis and homelessness. The Quincy Police Department has started a neighborhood policing program, working with community groups to address issues of crime and drug use. All interviewed say that these issues are all part of national trends.
- **Money.** The state governments of Illinois, Indiana and Massachusetts sponsor robust downtown development infrastructures, geared to helping small cities. Loans, grants, tax breaks, and special state programs help considerably.
- **Visitors.** Tourism is a major initiative in all three cities. Quincy attracts visitors from an immense rural area for which it is the largest city, and wants to draw more visitors from St. Louis and Chicago. Greencastle wishes to be a draw for rural residents in a wide area, and North Adams has already arrived at a point where tourism is its number-one industry.
- **Hospitals.** All these small cities are medical centers, to one degree or another, owing in part because they are stand-alone cities, taking care of surrounding populations, and feeding patients to the huge medical centers in the large cities.
- **Higher education.** All have universities or colleges, and those institutions are important. Quincy University, a Catholic institution of about 1,200 students, has been there since 1860 but has been experiencing serious financial challenges recently, and a capital campaign has been mounted to revive its fortunes. North Adams is the home to Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, a state institution, with an enrollment of 1,800 students. DePauw University in Greencastle, a private institution there since 1837, has 2,300 students.
- **Love of beer, wine.** Micro-brews and wineries proliferate in all three cities, or in their surrounding areas.
- **"Can do" attitude.** The most important common denominator among the towns, however, is that revival efforts require that many different groups come together for the betterment of their downtowns and that volunteers be recruited to get much of the work done.

"There's three ingredients to every successful downtown campaign," Quincy's Bruce Guthrie says. "Number one is vision. Number two is passion among the city residents and volunteers, and number three is capital, dollars. You don't have those three components you don't do it."



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