



Downtown Idea Exchange

Essential Information for Downtown Revitalization

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Transportation

Adding bike lanes and widening sidewalks to create a more “walkable” feel in three downtowns

Sidewalk traffic can be stimulated or stunted by vehicular traffic and roadway design. Three dramatic examples come from the heart of Michigan where Scott Ringer and Scott Clein of Giffels-Webster Engineers, have been working for many years.

Thoroughfare’s reconstruction made dramatic impact downtown

Scott Ringer has worked with Ferndale, MI (est. pop. 21,110), since 1995. His initial project involved the reconstruction of a roadway from four lanes to two, with constant on-street parking. The changes helped spur a remarkable revival of the downtown.

West Nine Mile Road, the heart of the downtown, was narrowed to one lane in each direction. With the single traffic lanes and buffer of added parking, traffic slowed, and people felt safer strolling along the main street.

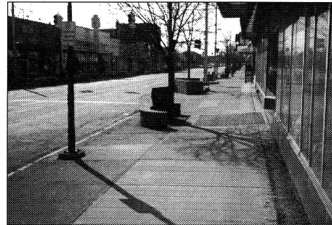
“That project itself in 1998 was very instrumental in the city seeing a significant increase in downtown traffic, both vehicular and pedestrian, and also retail. Their stores went from a high vacancy rate down to about the current three percent vacancy rate,” Ringer says.

The downtown is today considered a success story of the metro Detroit area. Over the last 10 years, the City has seen the largest taxable value increase in the county.

“Doing these infrastructure projects led the residents to really believe in their community,” he says, and to take better care of what they owned.

Ravaged CBD can revive through new zoning, reworked roadway

Downtown Ferndale’s successful turnaround is a model and idea-starter for the bedroom community of Eastpointe, MI (formerly East Detroit, est. pop. 32,500), whose city center was ravaged by the widening of a main road through town carrying traffic from Detroit.



“It was a rather typical story where ... all of a sudden, you’ve got no sense of downtown anymore. You’ve just got this eight-lane roadway gunning through at 45 miles an hour. Over the course of the last three years, we’ve been working with them to help re-imagine what they want to become again,” says Scott Clein.



Downtown Ferndale saw a dramatic turnaround after it added on-street parking as a buffer and made other streetscape improvements.

“We went through a full visioning session of the downtown area. We’ve done a study of Gratiot Avenue in which we’re recommending elimination of lanes to widen the [traffic] buffers, to provide larger areas for outdoor café and bench seating, and also to add on-street bike lanes up and down the corridor, and maybe even slow the speed legislatively if we can, to try to give back that feel to the area,” he says.

“We’re working with them to figure out what they want to be, how they need to get there, and what we can do from a practical point of view to help set up their Tax Increment Financing, downtown development authority plan, and what not to put them on the right path so they’re making the proper decisions as they push forward.”

A new central business zoning classification designates Eastpointe’s key traffic intersection area as a specific downtown shopping district that encourages new retail, mixed uses, and outdoor cafe areas.

Even Motown has adopted a non-motorized transportation plan

Funded by the state department of transportation, a Non-Motorized Urban Transportation Master Plan that Giffels-Webster co-developed was adopted by the City of Detroit in 2008. The plan calls for various improvements for walking and biking, including nearly 400 miles of bike lanes.

Since the adoption of the plan, the firm has been working directly with well-organized community district councils to help them do community-wide master plans.

“Certainly, a big emphasis has been on non-motorized transportation, trying to add bike lanes and widen sidewalks, to bring that walkable feel back to [business district] areas,” Clein says. That also means eliminating lanes of traffic that aren’t needed. Implementation tools for taking over traffic lanes for parking and/or bike lanes can be as affordable as paint, pavement markings, and signage.

“We’ve got about 16 miles of bike lane that we’re hoping to have constructed this year throughout the Corktown and Mexican-town neighborhoods, very rich neighborhoods on the west side of Detroit.”

The firm is also working with community groups in adjacent neighborhoods to add another four to six miles of bike lanes next year, which would link those neighborhoods with other walkable business district areas and trail projects to the east.

“Downtowns and communities of every size are looking at non-motorized transportation plans,” Clein says. “More people are looking at living in cities and urban areas now than perhaps anytime in the last 50 years. I also think that more people are putting value on walkability and on non-motorized or bicycle facilities than they have perhaps ever.”

Today’s young professionals, he says, “want a walkable, mixed-use environment, with the ability to bike and have other means of transportation.”

All that can be created downtown, if it’s not already in place, through “a true commitment from the community and its leaders. As engineers, we can make anything happen, as long as the laws of physics are upheld and funding is available. But if a community doesn’t truly want to do something, there’s not a whole lot we can do. Traffic engineering right now is probably the biggest stumbling block to implementation of a lot of non-motorized improvements, and streetscape improvements in general.”

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