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## (Re)Building Downtown: A Guidebook for Revitalization.

When Alex Morrison, executive director of the Urban Development Authority for Macon-Bibb County, Georgia, started on a comprehensive plan for downtown revitalization, "we knew we wanted walkability and housing," he said. "But the how and where [were] driven by the public process." His emphasis on community engagement drove home a point in a new guidebook, *(Re)Building Downtown: A Guidebook for Revitalization*, from Smart Growth America (SGA).

A recent event hosted by the nonprofit group showed that downtown revitalization is not just for the largest cities. The guide is designed to be used by communities of all sizes no matter what their stage of development or redevelopment. Macon is a medium-sized city of 155,000, but the strategies can be used in suburban shopping centers, former industrial parks, or other underused places with the potential for redevelopment. The goal is to create a vibrant, walkable neighborhood that will attract businesses and residents alike.

"This is really about place making," says Chris Zimmerman, SGA's vice president for economic development.

Macon has some neighborhoods more than 100 years old and with many long-term residents. Planners created focus groups where they interviewed over 2,000 stakeholders—major employers, small business owners, and residents—about what they wanted to see under the new plan.

Not only did the community involvement increase support for the plan, it also changed the plan's contours. Residents said they wanted a more walkable community. So instead of a road project, the city created a neighborhood park. New Town Macon, a public/private partnership created to encourage downtown revitalization, has a buggy and trail network and a heritage trail along the river that winds through the city's neighborhoods. A park that had not been used because residents felt it was dangerous now has a fountain with a public plaza and the support of the community.

Macon also included an equity component in its plans from the beginning. When a study found that a certain number of new housing units could be added downtown, city planners used a downtown assistance program to ensure that a portion would be affordable housing.

Before its downtown revitalization, Macon had a four-lane highway running through the city. People sped through the city instead of lingering. Now, the streets are laid out on a more pedestrian scale.

"Our streets evoke a sense of leisure," said Morrison.

Macon's revitalization has had its struggles. The business community wanted Anderson's office to tear down the city's historic opera house so it could build new developments on the site. "I told them they had the wrong guy," he says.

"You can't save every one of [the historic buildings]," Anderson says. "Pick the ones that are singular to your community, [the ones] that if you lost [them] you would lose the character of your community."

In Missoula, Montana, retailers fled downtown when a regional shopping mall was built in the 1970s. In the mid-1980s, the downtown merchants organized, recruited, and served as advocates and marketers for the city's downtown as the revitalization process began. Mayor John Engen, elected in 2005, has continued the process.

Engen's office created a master plan, working with the local business improvement district and parking commission to sell them on the process. After the downtown master plan was discussed for two years with the many stakeholders, it was ratified by the city council.

The next step was revising the zoning code. "In some cases, it was 70 years old," says Engen. "It did not reflect what Missoula, Montana, was in the early 2000s." The rezoning plan brought controversy and even a lawsuit. But the new zoning regulations were approved by the city council in 2009. The new zoning code and subdivision regulations will work together to promote high-quality development in Missoula, Engen said.

East metropolitan St. Paul, Minnesota, is an example of how transit-oriented development can help revitalize an urban area. A new light-rail line has brought $2 million in new development to the Twin Cities. But the eastern part has a ten-mile (16 km) arterial strip that was created for the automobile era and that encourages people to pass through instead of stopping and spending time and money. East Metro Strong, a public/private partnership working to attract business and economic development to the area, has been working with SGA on ideas to revitalize the corridor.

SGA's free online resource breaks the redevelopment process down into seven steps:

- Understand your community. It is important to reach out to and meet with as many stakeholders as possible.
- Create an attractive, walkable place. This step includes providing multiple transportation options.
- Diversify the downtown economy. Diversity means jobs, new homes, and a diverse array of retail and business.
- Build in equity. Opportunities for affordable housing should be built in from the start, along with a way for current residents to stay in the neighborhood.
- Improve government regulations and processes. Make sure that zoning regulations permit the type of development you seek.
- Finance projects. Creative thinking about financing may yield surprising benefits.
- Establish ongoing place management. A revitalized downtown will need continuing maintenance.

**The Urban Land Institute**

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