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PLACEMAKING IN TWO DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS



DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

By Barry Cassidy

There has been an uptick in towns and cities, allowing open-air dining to increase capacity/distancing issues in restaurants. There was a need to react quickly in a situation where there is a possibility that losing the downtown retail trade that was developed is possible.

It brings into focus how slow things move in government. If these kinds of decisions can be made in a crisis, why does it take so long when things are not in emergency mode? It is puzzling that programs can be developed, making decisions at lightning speed when it usually is a long process.

I look at the Paycheck Protection Program and how fast they moved to adapt an existing program (7A loan) for relief. I see the world reacting to the virus, and changes seem to be happening at a record pace as people cannot meet in person, and things need to be moved forward with some level of haste.

In the case of letting restaurants survive in downtown was an easy one. The streets of downtown are where people get to know each other, where people meet to share a collective experience. Adding life to a street is essential for a successful revitalization, and outdoor dining does that. The retail feeds off the restaurant trade, even if it is a future purchase secured through a little window shopping a week before.

The outdoor dining to achieve proper spacing between people has been replicated time and again throughout the

world. It was a phenomenon that probably will be more beneficial in warmer climates come the winter.

Maintaining the economic base is imperative while we sit out the virus, but the draws of the downtowns have to be preserved. Sooner or later, there will be many vacant stores, which will signal economic decline for the municipality.

But really, the innovation with the virus has been telecommuting and the introduction of zoom meetings in place of real-life meetings. I would suppose that the question is still unanswered if people need to show up for work in person, or can an organization function remotely? In cases like dense cities, that would mean decentralization of the workforce leading to the functional obsolescence of the foot traffic that spurs the food and beverage trade in the cities.

The food and beverage trade in the suburbs is a different story. In those cases, they are the anchors of downtown.

In many cases there are no large office buildings and the foot traffic is drawn by the restaurants and pubs. It makes my idea for art and entertainment in Phoenixville look good. But if you look at



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it in hindsight, with all the information, you know that I tried very hard to bring office buildings downtown.

Restaurants are the lifeblood of the smaller commercial districts and help the property tax assessment if they are a prosperous district. The kind of development that is then assessed on an income basis versus a comparable sale data model. It is crucial to school districts, and the governing bodies to have that kind of revenue to keep the property taxes low on the residential properties.

All that being said, it appears there is a reason for governing bodies across the globe to be concerned about losing their restaurant base. It is particularly true as the heyday of the malls seems to be coming to an end. Retail will most likely go

where the people are, and we have become a society that values the treat of a dinner at a local restaurant.

The problem is going to be for larger cities like New York City, which is experiencing an exodus based partly on the social climate and from the standpoint that remote work is now possible and can be done anywhere. Maybe it will be an attraction in the coming years that the requirement to show up only once in a while to fulfill your work obligation.

My wife is a good example. She is the Director of International Programs for Temple Law School. And she is now on a one day a week in town and the rest of the days remotely through the use of zoom and other computer applications.

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DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

(Continued from page 61)

It impacts SEPTA budget as she does not have a rail pass any longer; she does not get lunch near the university any longer, as her commerce in the city has changed to commerce in Chester County. It also impacted the beauty salon as she does not trust that kind of intimate contact any longer.

The virus seems to have changed things quite a bit and having different outcomes for different situations and population distributions is a sure bet. The good part about it is that it has made the government more responsive. People in positions of authority have to make decisions without the benefit of a \$20,000 study, telling them to do the obvious.

Smaller communities seem to have secured a decided advantage in their ability to direct their future. Widespread unity in preserving their base is in sharp contrast to the larger cities as they watch their retail and commercial economic base be burned or looted. It makes you think that just like the white "housing" flight after the 1968 riots, there will be a white "capital" flight from the cities as

the office building is made somewhat obsolete. It appears this is going to be a problem for larger cities, but will work to the advantage of the smaller cities and boroughs as the capital has to go somewhere.

People think that all the fires, smashing public art in protest, and anti-white rhetoric will show the world the inequity of American culture. I believe it will worsen the plight of minorities in the city as the professional job locations disappear. The related service jobs will fade into oblivion with the abandonment or large-scale cut back in office space. Combined with the defunding of police and an effort to "cancel culture" that offends them, people in the city are going to find the government unable to act based upon budget restrictions.

A grim Hegelian dialectic prediction, but it is the tale of combing two random instances of change, which will result in a random synthesis rather than the postulated thesis.

Barry Cassidy is a freelance grant and economic development consultant. He can be reached at barrycassidy@comcast.net.

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