An Inventory of Extension Programs to Help Create Resilient Small City Downtowns


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Purpose

The NCRCRD Directors have challenged us to reinvent community vitality programming across our program areas and our states. This project responds to that challenge by focusing on the breadth of Extension education related to downtown revitalization in small cities and villages.

Downtown districts continue the difficult transition from their earlier roles as retail centers. For many communities, this transition has been characterized by a disregard of market changes, failed attempts to revitalize Main Street, or simply the intentional pursuit of edge-of-town development.

Despite many reasons for difficulty, downtowns remain important to community development. First, downtown represents a community’s “sense of place,” the uniqueness that defines the character and authenticity of a place. Second, downtown represents the “central place,” the location most convenient to where people live. Finally, the visible health of a downtown is a symbol of economic wellbeing in a community. People’s first impressions of a community are often shaped by what they see downtown.

Today, many “resilient” downtowns are working to become diversified, multiuse centers that include housing, work space, the arts, restaurants and entertainment, services, and niche retail. This requires strengthening business activity, attracting new uses for buildings, and making sure downtown enhances local quality of life. With research-based education and guidance, communities can pursue initiatives that will lead to resilient downtowns able to endure future challenges.

The purpose of our work has been to bring together community economic development educators to examine current downtown revitalization programming in the region and nation. This knowledge has lead to synthesizing the strengths of each of our states and increasing their capacity. The intent has been to set the stage for the development of multistate educational programs and resources. In the long term, this project is expected to influence economic conditions of downtowns and quality of life in communities throughout the North Central Region.
**Our Team’s Approach**

This project has engaged a study team of ten educators from Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin to explore Extension’s roles in creating resilient downtowns. The team members were selected in each state based on their varying interests and programming related to downtown revitalization.

To launch the project, the team met in Dubuque, Iowa in October 2015 to share their state’s Extension work in downtown revitalization. The meeting also included presentations from the Iowa Main Street organization and a private consultant to learn about external perceptions of Extension work in this discipline.

David Ivan (Michigan State University Extension) presented his research as a foundation for discussion of Extension programming to create resilient small city downtowns. Dave provided an example of exceptional community development programming related to downtown development. The meeting ended with a work plan that would lead to the development of a comprehensive online inventory of Extension programs and educational resources related to downtown development.

After our first meeting, the team was divided up and assigned separate tasks. Bimonthly web conferences were held to update each other on progress and for planning the next steps. One team focused on the layout and content of the website. We eventually decided to utilize a University of Wisconsin – Extension web development specialist to design and construct the website.

Another team set out to research the different programs and resources throughout the country. Research was conducted by visiting Extension webpages and searching for revitalization programs. This has included contacting state Extension directors directly for their input.

With the inventory under development, the team reviewed and refined the list of programs and resources to make sure they were directly relevant to downtown development. They were then sorted among nine topics.
Web-Based Inventory of Extension Programs and Resources

A web-based inventory of Extension programs and resources related to downtown revitalization has been developed for use by educators and by downtown professionals. The website has been launched and is searchable by topic, state or keyword. This website was designed to be user friendly and easily navigable (image follows).

http://fyi.uwex.edu/resilientdowntowns/

In addition, space has been reserved on this website for a parallel project also funded through NCRCRD. This project will include ten case studies of resilient and vibrant downtowns in the Upper Midwest.

Home Page

The Menu on the top of the website directs the user to the HOME page, ABOUT page and a SUBMIT a program/resource page.

A sidebar provides examples of downtown success stories throughout the Midwest. These success stories illustrate various practices employed to create resilient and vibrant downtowns and are being developed by separate NCRCRD team.

The middle of the home page has programs and resources segmented into nine categories of topics that are relevant to downtown development. These include business development, customer service, leadership and organization, marketing, place-making and design, planning, real estate and financing, research, and tourism. These topics make up the grid on the front page represented by a picture. When you click on one of the topics, you are directed to a page that includes a category description.

Searching for Programs and Resources

There are three ways to search for a program or resource: by category, by state, and by keyword.
The image to the right shows the search results page for Texas’ programs and resources. The viewer can see the name as well as a small description. Once the viewer comes across a program or resource that seems relevant to their research, they can click on the title, or the ‘Read More’ button for more information.

The full description of a resource is also pictured to the right. On the top center is the name of the resource. The left of the page features the Extension logo as well as contact information for the resource. A more detailed description can be found next to the contact information.

Additionally, the bottom of the page has the different tags associated with the program or resource. If someone was interested in learning more about tourism and was curious about other resources related to tourism, then they would only need to click on the topic word at the bottom of the screen.

Lastly, the ‘View Source’ button directs the user to the webpage associated with the resource, or the pdf we have on file.

**Submitting a Program or Resource for Inclusion in the Website**

Extension educators around the country are encouraged to add their programs if not already listed. The website allows one to submit their own program or resource. The link to this is in the header of the webpage and directs them to a survey where they can fill in the necessary information to have their work presented on the website.
What We've Learned about Extension's Role

Extension offers objective, research-based programs and resources that contribute to the creation of vibrant and resilient downtowns in small cities and towns. These programs and resources typically complement technical services offered by state agencies/Main street programs, private consultants and other organizations. While programs and resources continue to be added to this inventory, a few observations are apparent:

- While only a few states have programs specific to downtown revitalization, over half of the 50 states offer programs that are transferable to this specific area of study.
- Extension provides depth in certain areas that may not be offered by other organizations such as state Main Street programs.
- Extension work is often related to business development, planning and research.
- Extension work typically does not include a comprehensive downtown development curriculum such as the “Main Street Four-Point Approach.”
- Many Extension programs are customizable depending on the needs of the community.
- Some programs are unique to each state and may not be transferable to other states due to data availability and other factors.
- The Midwest appears to have the largest concentration of Extension resources and programs that support downtown development.
Next Steps: Connecting Downtown Revitalization Programming Nationally

This project has been a catalyst for new programming ideas for educators in the three participating states. It has also received enthusiastic response from Extension educators in many states. To maintain the momentum, the following “next steps” are recommended:

- Continue adding programs and resources to the inventory and maintaining the website.
- Add case studies from the parallel NCRCRD project on resilient and vibrant downtowns in the Upper Midwest.
- Promote the website to potential Extension users. Present the inventory on a NCRCRD webinar and at CDS and NACDEP conferences.
- Promote the website to external users through the USDA Rural Information Center, National Main Street Center, and other channels.
- Explore other avenues for connecting programs and resources such as e-Xtension.
- Consider expansion of the website to include an easy-to-use forum for educators interested in interacting with each other.
- Related to the above, consider adding to the website a place where program and research gaps can be explored as a starting point for new research initiatives.
- Pursue opportunities to develop multistate programs and resources within the NCRCRD region.
- Monitor usage of the site.
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