

Why a Strong Downtown is Good for a City's Business Community



A strong downtown business community concentrates talent, culture, art and innovation in a way that can turn a walk down the sidewalk into an unexpected exchange of ideas. Downtown and Main Street businesses tend to support each other and reinvest in a big way into their communities. Early development patterns that dominate downtowns - density and lack of parking lots surrounding each building - typically create the most intense uses of land and infrastructure, saving cities money and natural resources.

Everything we do at Kilbourne Group, a redevelopment firm focused on historic renovation and mixed-use urban infill in downtown Fargo, North Dakota, is driven by our belief that *vibrant downtown create smart, healthy cities*.

How do others feel a strong downtown propels a city forward?

- 1. A strong downtown makes your city somewhere people want to live.**

“I’ve had the opportunity to work in an urban environment for nearly two decades. A strong urban core helps the entire community thrive,” says **Tim Curoe, CEO of R.D. Offutt Company**, which is moving its offices into Block 9 in the heart of downtown Fargo in 2020. “I see Fargo in that same way. The downtown has once again become a vibrant center for business, entertainment, and social activities, and people are moving there because of that.”

2. A strong downtown provides culture and lifestyle choices that retain people.

“Downtowns are the soul of a community,” says **David Brown, President of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce**. In March, Brown visited Fargo-Moorhead as part of a speaker series from The Arts Partnership about actively supporting the arts in our communities and in our businesses. “If your downtown is dying, you can see the rest of your community probably is too. I’ve never seen a dying downtown that has a vibrant economy and is a vibrant place that people want to live. There’s an economic reason to do all this, but a lot of it is about keeping people. They want diversity in their choices in where and how to live, urban, suburban, core neighborhoods... We need to be able to provide all those choices if we want to compete for the kind of talent we need.”



Brown points to a moment in time, decades ago, when community leaders came to a crossroads. Were they all in on downtown, or not?

“We needed to agree that the perception of our downtown is really a reflection of the health of our overall community,” Brown continues. “It’s our city’s image and our future. It’s a driving strategy behind our public and private and investments and decisions. Today, it’s natural that large-scale investments are made in downtown Omaha and it’s become a shared neighborhood we’re all excited about.”

What about smaller communities? Can a city realize benefits if their downtown consists of a couple blocks of Main Street?

3. A strong downtown is your city’s gathering place and where we go to support each other.

“A strong contingent of businesses on any city or town's main street is absolutely a key part of a healthy and vibrant community. In most small towns, main street is where connections are made,” says **Jim Murphy, Executive Director of the Trail County Economic Development Commission** based in Hillsboro, North Dakota (population 1,600). “The owners and operators of the Main Street businesses will, no doubt, be the ones asked to help sell raffle tickets for the volunteer fire department's fundraiser or asked to put a poster up in the window with the 4-H Achievement Days dates for all to see. In many ways, the local hardware store is the center for information dissemination as people stop to chat with the owners (who are often running the store) or each other as they pass each other in the aisle.”

Renewed interest and commitment is leading to a new era of rebuilding and construction in our downtowns. Through North Dakota Governor Doug Burgum’s Main Street Initiative, we see [student groups meeting](#) in towns across the state to get involved in their own Main Street revitalization. The city of Hazen created a Hometown Heroes program to beautify the streets while honoring veterans. Minot invested heavily in reconstructing its Main Street as one way to enhance Minot’s ability to attract new residents and address its workforce shortage. Belfield, Watford City, Jamestown, Binford, Rugby, Garrison and more have been recognized by the Governor’s office for their Main Street revitalization efforts.

Main Street businesses need your support more than ever. Shopping local and supporting local art gives you a deeper connection to your community, and that’s good for everybody.