



Strong leadership, smart growth: Development expert gives advice on how Mobile can revitalize downtown

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MOBILE, Alabama – When it comes to smart growth ideas for downtown, city leaders should "think small in a big way," said Ed McMahon, keynote speaker at the **Downtown Mobile Alliance's Sept. 26 annual meeting.**

"I believe downtown's time is now," said McMahon, who is a senior resident fellow with the Urban Land Institute and a widely recognized expert on economic development and land-use policies.

"A whole series of trends are reconvening" to turn the focus back to the importance of a city's downtown district, he said in his speech.

Those trends include a decline in the manufacturing industry and growth in the professional and business services sectors; more city leaders taking a fresh look at mass transit; an increased demand for downtown housing and office space; and an increased demand for mixed-use developments, instead of strip malls or big-box stores.

The key to a downtown's economic development, he said, is to encourage people to come back over and over, whether it's to visit a park, restaurant or art gallery, by "creating places that attract their affection."

After the annual meeting, McMahon sat down with AL.com for a brief discussion of how Mobile can continue its path toward revitalizing its downtown. Here are some of his recommendations.

Economic revival is "almost never the one big thing." Many cities similar to Mobile have tried the approach of adding a certain attraction, such as an aquarium or a casino, in hopes of drawing more people downtown, but that's not necessarily the best approach, McMahon said. Instead, city leaders should think in terms of small



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Ed McMahon, a senior resident fellow with the Urban Land Institute, gives the keynote address at the Downtown Mobile Alliance's annual meeting on Sept. 26. (Courtesy of Henry Perkins)

changes that make a big difference, such as offering economic incentives to encourage a McDonald's or a CVS to set up shop inside an existing historic building.

Build on your assets. "Focus on what makes your community cutting-edge, unique or different," he said. The most successful communities are those with a vision for the future, and that vision almost always grows out of an inventory of their assets; they try to build on what they've got, McMahan said. Mobile's strongest assets are its historic buildings, its downtown green spaces and its waterfront, he said.

Make it easier for people to get downtown, and to get to the water. Mayor Sandy Stimpson **has pushed for a more walkable Water Street**, possibly with fewer lanes. "A big issue in the Urban Land Institute is how to reconnect cities to the water," McMahan said. "We've been involved in many, many cities where that has been an issue." Many coastal cities have made the mistake of building highways between the downtown area and the water, and are now spending millions to re-do those developments, he said. Examples include Hartford, Conn., which has spent millions to deck over its interstate to reconnect its downtown to the Connecticut River.

It's crucial to have strong leadership and committed citizens. McMahan cited Charleston, S.C., Mayor Joe Riley, who's been in office for 36 years. "He's the city's 'chief designer,'" McMahan said. When developers wanted to build on the industrial waterfront, putting in high-rise condos, Riley turned them down and pushed to have waterfront parks instead. "There were those who said he was taking the most valuable land in the area off of the tax rolls," McMahan said. "But now, the land next to the waterfront parks is the highest valued land in the city" and Charleston's appealing, walkable, 13-mile waterfront is a model for other cities to emulate.

Don't be afraid to say "no" if the proposed development isn't the best plan for everyone. Part of the problem with downtown and with development in general, McMahan said, is that city laws "make it easy to develop in places we don't want it," and vice versa. "One of the biggest stumbling blocks has been a fear of saying 'no' to anything," he said, noting that community leaders who stick to their guns are rewarded with the types of development that they want. "Government Street could be St. Charles Avenue (in New Orleans), but it's not," McMahan said, because Mobile officials weren't willing to insist on high-quality developments, in which buildings are closer to the curb, with parking in the back.

Being willing to stand up to developers means that city officials must think long-term and make decisions with the best interests of all citizens in mind, he said. "It's about connecting the development to a bigger vision of the community." If a development project doesn't contribute to the overall vision, it shouldn't be given the green light, he said.

It's important to have an education center in downtown. McMahan said many communities made a mistake when officials chose to build universities and community colleges "in the middle of nowhere," and added that having a place for students to gather downtown could be an economic shot in the arm for a quiet community. He gave as an example the University of Maryland's decision to open a new branch in several old buildings in downtown Hagerstown, Md. "It's done an incredible job in bringing back this city, which was pretty sleepy," he said.

Think long-term about transportation needs. McMahon did not give an opinion on whether or not the **proposed Interstate 10 Bridge** over the Mobile River is necessary, but he did note that in the 40-plus years that he has lived in the Washington, D.C., area, "We've never *not* been widening I-95." If the only solution to congestion is building highways, it doesn't deal with the underlying issues relating with land use and transportation, he said.

More cities are experimenting with rail transit, he said. "There are less expensive ways to improve personal mobility." For example, Portland spent \$60 million on infrastructure for bicycles, he said, about the same cost as one mile of urban freeway. "It's put Portland on the map as a hip, cool place to be."

However, McMahon was unequivocal on whether or not the proposed I-10 Bridge should have **a bicycle and pedestrian path**. "I would say it would be a huge mistake not to have that," he said, "given the fact that you've got world-class bike trails and walking paths on the Eastern Shore." Almost no cities are building major bridges today without providing a place for bicyclists and walkers to enjoy them, he said.

Those who say adding the path would be too expensive "are a great example of those who know the cost of everything and the value of nothing," McMahon added.

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