



Virtual Panel: “Downtown After the Pandemic: A New Paradigm?”

Summary of Panelist Comments

David Downey, President and CEO

International Downtown Association

- Downtowns after the pandemic will look and act differently than they did prior to 2020. While no one is exactly sure what changes will be permanent, we do know that downtowns that are exclusively or primarily Central Business Districts will not thrive.
- We’ve just experienced four disruptions to our downtowns: 1) dealing with a global health crisis; 2) experiencing serious shut downs of activity during the pandemic; 3) a loss of confidence in the health, safety and security of city centers; and 4) changes in the work patterns of employees.
- What is the impact of work from home as a permanent part of the workforce? Too soon to tell, but we know that having 100% of the workforce in the office on any given day will no longer be the case.
- While this presents challenges, it also may open up opportunities for mid-size cities like Louisville, where there tends to be more fluidity between home and work with fewer commuting time challenges to coming back to the office. Cities like Louisville need to understand how to best grow business back under this new hybrid work model.
- Patterns of remote work are uneven among different cities. Understand your own trends, don’t merely default to perceived national trends.
- Leadership matters; engage both downtown employers AND their employees to understand what type of downtown will re-engage them.
- Single use downtowns did not fare well during the pandemic; and will not do well going forward. A more diverse mix of uses is essential.
- Activating the public realm is critical; Downtowns need to shift from a 9-5 mentality to a 24/7 approach.
- More residential development is absolutely critical; understand the needs of a residential neighborhood, not merely residential buildings.
- Look at existing spaces in your downtown that are underutilized and seek out innovative and interesting ways to activate those spaces.



“We know that activating and leveraging the public realm is the key to creating an active and vibrant downtown environment, which offers a truly special place experience. - David Downey

**MALLORY BACHES, President
Congress for New Urbanism**

- Cities need a variety of drivers to bring people together downtown; not just office workers.
- Downtowns need to be treated as vibrant places where people *want* to be; this means focusing on creating places to live, performing arts, open spaces, and repositioning their streets,
- Isolated, single use city centers are now dinosaurs (pandemic accelerated this trend).
- “Lean on adaptability over predictability”
- There are significant opportunities to reposition downtown office space to residential. But not all office buildings are easily adaptable or economically viable, especially modern office towers. Focus on older, B and C space buildings. These make the most sense; many such buildings in downtown Louisville. Prioritize these through incentives, tax breaks, etc., as many cities are currently doing (e.g. Boston)
- Insure that additional residential development – and the creation of true residential neighborhoods downtown and on its edges - is a key component to your development strategy.
- Downtowns now have a surplus of off-street parking, and will no longer need as much in the future. This was likely true prior to the pandemic, but now this is much more evident. Look for better uses for surface parking...some short term such as pop-ups short term, but longer term as residential buildings or park sites. Downtown Louisville has more surface parking than many of its competitive cities.
- Focus on your streets; need to reduce speeds, eliminate excess roadway capacity, eliminate one-way streets. Prioritize them for pedestrians over cars.
- Pay attention to heat islands effects of public policies.
- The desirability of the “15 minute city” is becoming stronger and stronger; downtowns like Louisville are perfectly suited to meet this need, as long as the connections in downtown are prioritized.



“The pandemic has accelerated the rapid desire to increase people-focused urban solutions.” ... Mallory Baches

Laurie Volk, Partner
Zimmerman Volk Associates

- The pandemic has resulted in major disruptions to our downtowns, as well as accelerating changes that were already in process: 1) housing affordability and homeless challenges; 2) high office vacancies; 3) empty retail space.
- A focus on more housing both within downtown and along its edge neighborhoods must be a major element of a community’s downtown economic development strategy.
- Additional housing can be an important development catalyst, and also provides additional market demand for restaurants and retail businesses struggling with a loss of office workers.
- Conversions of B and C space outdated and underutilize office properties should be encouraged and incentivized.
- Missing middle housing; especially in edge neighborhoods; deals with affordability across a variety of income ranges as well as offering different housing styles that can attract a wider range of potential residents.
- Missing middle housing strategies have become an important component of affordability; key is range of housing styles and densities.

“Housing is the new economic engine for downtowns.”... Laurie Volk

JAMES LIMA, Principal
James Lima Planning + Development

- The future health of downtowns depends to a great extent on the “experience of place” that they offer.
- Place-making is often thought of by policy-makers as a “soft goal”. In fact, Place-Making can be shown to have positive economic impacts; this will be more important in post-pandemic downtowns.
- As a result of the pandemic: people now have more choices than ever on where they work, where they live, where they shop, and where they choose to spend their time. Many of these choices ultimately are made based on the quality, vitality, and uniqueness of the places they experience.



- Places that highlight what makes them special and unique will have a significant competitive advantage over places that don't. The character of downtown streets, districts, and public realm are critical components of these choices.
- More people choose to live in places where there is a seamless flow between indoor and outdoor living; downtown's public realm provides such outdoor space.
- The "Social Infrastructure" of places must be prioritized. Downtowns need to function as central *social* districts rather than central business districts.
- What composes the key elements of a Central Social District: downtown residents; experiential retail, food, beverage; arts and culture; parks and open spaces; and areas that are diverse, equitable, and accessible. A place that residents and workers want to be, not where they have to be.
- All cities are competing for talent, not merely new businesses. Today's talent seeks out innovative and compelling places.

"Today's new paradigm is: capital follows people...people follow place...place needs investment." ... James Lima



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Downtowns that are both successful and competitive in the future must be broader than merely a Central Business District. They must include a broad mix of uses and attractions. The concept of downtown as a Central Social District, that includes residential; experiential retail, food and beverage; arts and culture; parks and open space; and encourages diversity, equity and accessibility.
- More housing – both downtown and on its edges -must be a key priority. Not just housing units, but the amenities and feel of a residential neighborhood.
- The conversion of outdated and underutilized office buildings to residential should be a high priority and incentivized. The focus should be on Class B and Class C properties.
- A mix of housing prices and housing styles is critical. Look for opportunities for “missing middle” housing on the edges of downtown.
- The improvement of the public realm – downtown streets, open spaces, plazas, and sidewalks – is not just a nice thing to have, but more and more will be a key component of its economic development strategy.
- Downtown’s streets – the major acreage of its public realm – should be prioritized for people who are downtown rather than for accommodating cars. Many cities are slowing speeds, reducing excess capacity, transforming to two-way operations in their downtowns, and finding new uses for an excess of surface parking lots.
- The pandemic has made it easier for people – especially highly educated young professionals - to work remotely. While this reduces the activity levels in downtown, it provides opportunities for affordable, mid-sized cities such as Louisville to attract them...But



only if we can offer a vibrant and interesting sense of urbanity. Public officials and downtown economic development organizations must not only work with major employers in attracting workers back to their offices, but working with employees in order to create a place that they want to be part of.

- The pandemic has exacerbated concerns about safety and security in downtown. While this is hopefully a short-term challenge, if not addressed proactively it reduces downtown's economic health in the long term.
- The authenticity and uniqueness of a place is now more than ever an economic development factor, not simply a nice amenity. Downtowns that build upon these factors in their downtowns and the unique districts within them will be much more competitive in attracting talent to their cities.