



Downtown Vision, Inc.

MOVING DOWNTOWN FORWARD SUMMARY OF MAJOR POLICY POSITIONS

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Background

Jacksonville's image is largely based on the condition of Downtown. If Downtown is vibrant, Jacksonville as a region becomes more attractive to businesses, investors, young professionals, and visitors. Downtown's success directly impacts business retention and relocation creating jobs and stability for our local economy. The neglect of our Downtown is costly to all taxpayers on many levels including the underutilization of the existing infrastructure.

In March 2010, Downtown Vision, Inc. (DVI) released *Turning the Corner: Rethinking and Remaking Downtown*, recommending guiding principles for revitalizing Jacksonville's Downtown. With both mayoral and City Council elections approaching, DVI hopes that candidates will embrace certain tenets that we believe are both essential and attainable in the near term. Most importantly, history confirms that there is no "magic bullet" or single project that will turn around Downtown. A focused effort and a holistic approach to revitalization with emphasis on the environment and overall Downtown experience are necessary.

Focus on the Core

This tenet is listed first because only by concentrating our public and private resources on our city's historical and cultural core can we effectively revitalize not only that area but eventually all of our Downtown. By "core" we mean the approximately 20-block area comprising the three major nodes of activity in Downtown: the Jacksonville Landing/Performing Arts Center area, the Hemming Plaza/Laura Street government and cultural area and the slowly emerging Florida Theatre/Bay Street entertainment district. A glance around the core is enough to see that it is plagued with abandoned and underused buildings, un-landscaped parking lots, the absence of retail stores and other classic indicators of urban decay. We simply do not have the resources to resurrect the entire Downtown, which extends from the Sports Complex/Metropolitan Park/Shipyards area to the Convention Center and south to I-95 and Hendricks Avenue. Our history clearly shows that past dispersion of facilities, activities and funding has been detrimental to the creation of a vibrant Downtown. Thriving downtowns have density.

The most obvious—and perhaps the most challenging—example of the current state of the core is the deplorable condition of several prominent, historic and long-vacant buildings along Laura Street. We urge the city to concentrate on the reactivation and restoration of those structures, which are today a cancer in the very heart of our city.

Create a Compelling Downtown Experience

The city's emphasis on large publicly-funded capital projects over the past two decades has produced several magnificent structures but has done little to revitalize Downtown. Downtown Vision strongly believes that it is time to shift our emphasis to the smaller, less glamorous (and less expensive) essentials that make a city great and which have been largely neglected: things such as better landscaping, lighting and maintenance; vigorous code enforcement; better control of panhandling and nuisance activities; better connections between nodes of activity; traffic calming; and easier access to parking, to name just a few. In addition to increased attention to physical "fit and finish," we need to emphasize the importance of activation by encouraging more events and promotions in the core and venues that attract pedestrian visitors, such as those offering art, music, dining and entertainment. Happily, that process is now well underway, as evidenced by the popularity of the Art Walk, the success of the "Off the Grid" arts initiative, the emergence of a number of new nightlife venues and the current City-led initiative to study the feasibility of creating affordable work-live space for our creative community. But we need to do much more. We need to attract educational institutions and their students to our core; hold frequent small-scale events in the core; encourage sidewalk cafes; activate the Florida Theatre office space and the Haydon Burns Library; and focus city incentives for residential development and/or adaptive re-use of existing vacant and under-utilized buildings.

Insist on Public-Private Leverage

One common theme emerges in looking at cities that have successfully revitalized their Downtowns: public money is largely reserved for projects and activities that require or encourage significant private investment. We have done a poor job of such "leveraging" in our city. For example, our new arena and baseball grounds are spectacular facilities, built solely with taxpayer dollars, which serve their users well. However, they have done little or nothing to drive private investment or to revitalize the area around them. In three decades, the Prime Osborn Convention Center has spurred virtually no private investment in its vicinity. All of those facilities exist as virtual taxpayer islands. In contrast, when Greenville, South Carolina decided it needed a new AA baseball park, it partnered with a private developer, which built and operates the park as an integral part of a mixed use development funded largely with private dollars. Equally important, Greenville required the facility to be sited in a deteriorating area adjoining the city's thriving main street, thus stimulating nearby businesses and encouraging the adaptive re-use of once-dilapidated buildings.

The advantages of leveraging apply not only to capital projects but to programming as well. Special events should be judged not just by how well they serve their participants but by the economic impact they produce. The city has taken a commendable step toward leveraging by relocating the annual jazz festival from the isolation of Metropolitan Park to various venues in the core of the city, where it serves to create a festive buzz and generates much-needed revenue for Downtown businesses. City-funded events in the Sports Complex, Metropolitan Park and other peripheral venues do not stimulate our economy. In fact, they often produce "negative leverage" by draining people and dollars away from our established businesses. In addition, the city has a policy of evacuating people through-but not into-the core after big events at the Sports Complex. Many of those attending the events would likely patronize restaurants and entertainment facilities in the core but street closings and other traffic control policies make it almost impossible to do so.

In summary, the city needs to re-examine its policies to make sure that taxpayer funds spent on capital projects and on entertainment and recreation are, where possible, used in ways that encourage private development and have a positive economic impact on existing businesses.

Demand Bold and Ambitious Leadership

Great cities, without exception, have great Downtowns, with thriving businesses, people-friendly parks, vibrant cultural institutions and—most importantly—people on the streets enjoying those amenities. Instead of “The Bold New City of the South,” as Jacksonville once styled itself, we have become a “get by” town with little to distinguish us in a competitive world, despite having some of the best attributes of any city, including our incomparable riverfront, balanced economy, great port facilities and mild weather. Downtown Vision strongly believes that we as a city will never emerge from urban mediocrity until both our public and private leaders commit to creating and maintaining a standard of excellence matching or exceeding those of the greatest and most livable cities in the nation. Not only do we need individual leaders who are visionary and ambitious, we need to ensure that our efforts to create and maintain excellence continue year in and year out regardless of who occupies the mayor’s office or who sits on the city council. To that end, Downtown Vision believes we need structural changes in how Downtown efforts are planned, executed and funded. That restructuring should include a public or public-private entity that will provide coordination and leadership among all the public and private organizations that impact Downtown and such entity needs to have a consistent and reliable source of funding independent of political whim. There are many models of such entities around the nation that have proved effective. Those should be carefully examined in the process of deciding what will best work for Jacksonville.