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Beautification Boosts Economic Development



Retail and Community Development: Ten Key Factors that Support Your Beautification Initiatives

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City leaders throughout the U.S. have recognized that retail is economic development. Successful retail development brings the benefits of increased sales and property tax revenue, new jobs, more shopping and eating options, an enhanced quality of life, and reduced outflow of important dollars to other communities.

Retail is also a key to your city's beautification initiatives. When it comes to new and existing retail developments, there are many reasons to embrace beautification. Aesthetically-pleasing settings help attract both residents and visitors, make each business look more inviting, and encourage people to stay and shop longer in your community.

Industry statistics show that beautification alone can increase sales between 15 to 35 percent.

Equally important is how retail development can support your community's brand and image. This includes both the newer retail centers and your downtown district. Downtowns are still considered the heart of many communities, and proactive residential support and programs that assist and retain independent and national retailers are just a few of the components that keep that heart strong.

In a study of the retail industry, you'll find ten key factors that professionals universally agree contribute to an attractive retail development.

These factors that will support your community's beautification initiatives include:

1. A Sense of Place

Retail centers and your downtown district should reinforce your community's brand. Build upon any unique natural, historic and cultural assets, and embrace your geography through architecture and landscaping design.

2. A Good First Impression

Take a hard look at all the gateway signage in your community. Does it contribute to your beautification efforts? You always want to place your gateway signs where you make the first, best impression. Signage at city limits should be directional signage to your key retail districts. An attractive Wayfinding System should support your city's brand. Industry standards recommend using one-inch tall letters for every 12-feet of viewing distance, and avoiding more than five items on any one sign. You should also have gateways at the entrances to your downtown and other retail district entrances. These can span the street or include decorative crosswalks, pole banners, and other identifiers that create a sense of arrival.

3. A Branded Name

Your downtown and key retail districts should have a name. Successful examples in Texas include The Riverwalk, San Antonio; Sundance Square, Fort Worth; and The Strand Historic District, Galveston.

4. A Variety of Businesses

Attractive and inviting retail developments offer a pleasing array of choices. That includes coffee shops, bistros, sit-down restaurants, delis, galleries, and specialty retail stores. By clustering retail activity, the appeal of tourism-based retail is also increased. Nearby services such as conference centers, hotels, medical centers, banks, a post office, and library act as retail generators to further drive traffic downtown and to your shopping districts.

5. Consistent Hours

The hours and days that the businesses in your downtown and other retail centers are open must be consistent. The more businesses that are open into the evening, the better.

6. Environmental Charm

Successful downtowns and retail centers have common features including:

- New development that mirrors traditional, historic design
- Narrower streets
- Wider sidewalks
- Street trees spaced between 30' to 35' feet
- Buffers between sidewalks and traffic or parking
- Decorative crosswalks
- Decorative lighting
- Decorative sign posts and plates
- Water features
- Outside dining
- Bike racks
- Convenient, affordable parking – with at least a two-hour minimum
- Convenient, well maintained public restrooms

7. Excitement

Vibrant and attractive downtown and retail districts feature activities or entertainment such as farmers markets, street musicians, and artisans. Evening activities are especially important because industry research shows that 70 percent of all spending by both locals and visitors takes place after 4:00 p.m. A calendar of events that capitalizes on seasonal opportunities will increase year-round traffic and sales in your community.

8. Curb Appeal

Just like your home, the businesses within your downtown and retail centers should have curb appeal. Attractive displays that extend window displays outdoors will create beauty and invite customers to spend. We have found that curb appeal can contribute to 70 percent of a merchant's sales.

Note: an outside display is not a table piled high with sale merchandise.

9. Consistent Development Standards

Community development precedes economic development. Every city should have a comprehensive plan, zoning, and ordinances that uphold beautification across all sectors. Attractive retail signage can be ensured through a signage program that includes Wayfinding, gateways, billboards, and amenity identifiers.

Typical industry guidelines for retail signage include: placement that is no lower than seven feet; no higher than nine feet; and no wider than three and a half feet. Letter size should be consistent to avoid creating visual clutter.

Some cities have established a merchant-driven signage review committee that covers retail signage and the extension of window displays into exterior spaces.

10. Private/Public Partnerships

Successful communities have a coalition of leaders and stakeholders who share a common vision and passion for beautifying their city. Grants and incentives to encourage local merchants and restaurateurs to beautify their businesses have been established. Marketing and customer service workshops that educate merchants and restaurateurs on how to make their businesses more “attractive” to customers that are offered by the city have also proven to be very successful.

In Summary

People and businesses want to be in communities that offer everything. New data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows a shift from the exurbs back to city centers that offer a bustling mix of housing, employment, recreation, dining, shopping, and entertainment options. This trend is particularly evident among young professionals and retiring baby boomers.

While your town may not be a densely populated urban community, you can still study these trends and work towards fostering residential, business, and retail development and re-development that not only addresses your beautification goals, but makes your city an attractive place to live, work, and play.

Retail and Beautification Initiatives: Tips from around the State

City of Bastrop

“Local incentives are not only good for actually getting the retailer into a community, they can also allow the community to influence the overall design and/or theme of the project. Retail recruitment should be a holistic endeavor that is both good for the community coffers, and an opportunity to promote and protect a community’s brand and uniqueness.

Bastrop used language in a 380 agreement to ensure a retail development highlighted Bastrop’s heritage. The development was required to create a plaza area within the project that recognized the legacy of prominent figures in the city’s history, symbolized by Edward Burleson, as illustrated by the Project’s name ‘Burleson Crossing.’

Communities need to understand that every new development is a chance to strengthen the overall brand of the community. The requirements can’t be too onerous of course, but the community should leverage each investment for more than just sales tax revenues. It’s a simple choice: community leaders can either capitalize on the investment by others or see the opportunity squandered.”



Bastrop Burleson Plaza

David Quinn, CEcD, Executive Director, Bastrop Economic Development Corporation

City of Navasota

“The City of Navasota is steeped in historic charm and beauty, so in an effort to maintain the character of this beautiful city, the city council and staff worked with local citizens, the planning and zoning commission, and consultants to create and adopt a Master Plan for Retail Development as well as Commercial Design Guidelines. These guidelines make sure that re-development, as well as new construction, maintain the character as well as provide for landscaping and pedestrian walkways.”



Historic Downtown Navasota

Brad Stafford, City Manager

City of The Colony

“We have a gateway overlay district for our major corridors that sets a standard of beautification for commercial development. Some of the items specifically mentioned are building materials, open space, landscaping, and public art. The developer can choose from a variety of amenities to ensure they maximize the aesthetic standard of the commercial corridor. We are also proud to have a trail system that links the entire city by winding along the lake shore and through the residential and commercial developments to create more walkable community.”



Mixed used development of Austin Ranch

Keri Samford, Economic Development Director, The Colony Economic Development Corporation

Town of Fairview

"Retail in Fairview is a very important part of our economy. Last year, our largest retail development produced \$140 million in sales generating \$1.4 million in general revenue sales tax, \$700,000.00 in Type A sales tax and \$700,000.00 in Type B sales tax. We maintain high architectural and landscaping standards so that we attract those retailers who wish to be in a high quality, aesthetically pleasing environment. We believe that vibrant retail enhances the community by increasing our visibility in the area and producing sales tax revenue that allows us to maintain a high level of services while keeping property taxes low."



Attractions that support community beautification include an interactive fountain, gardens, and hike and bike trails.

Ray Dunlap, Economic Development Manager, Town of Fairview


City of Heath

"Our city and Economic Development Corporation (EDC) have taken a proactive approach to the growth that will ultimately come to Heath with a Comprehensive Plan and zoning regulations that uphold our vision as an upscale, lakeside community with a rural feel. We have also designed a Heath Village Center, which is a walkable, mixed-use development in the heart of our community. As we work to secure the right development partners, the EDC has moved forward to invest in an upgraded sign system that reflects our brand. We want residents and visitors to know that they have arrived in Heath!"



Rendering of the City's vision for Heath Village Center

Kim Dobbs, Community and Economic Development Director, City of Heath ★



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