



**The Community Foundation of Tompkins County
and
Ithaca Downtown Partnership
Critical Issues Roundtable
Downtown: Does It Matter?
Holiday Inn Ithaca
November 4, 2004
Executive Summary**

On November 4, 2004 the Community Foundation of Tompkins County and the Ithaca Downtown Partnership co-hosted a Critical Issues Roundtable on *Downtown: Does It Matter?* Attending the roundtable were seventy-seven community and civic leaders, representing a broad cross-section of residents and professionals in government, education, arts/culture, banking, and economic development who do and do not make use of the Downtown. We addressed two primary concerns through the Roundtable: 1) identifying ways to use Downtown now or in the near future, and 2) exploring those suggested uses to clarify, strengthen and move forward the strategy for development in the current downtown plan.

Framing the Issue: The Ithaca Experience

Gary Ferguson, Executive Director of the Ithaca Downtown Partnership, presented an historic perspective on Downtown Ithaca and its role in our region's development. While Ithaca has long been known as an eclectic and robust downtown fueled by the economic influences of nearby Cornell University and Ithaca College, historic trends have challenged the viability of Downtown Ithaca.

The decline of the broader downtown was most striking from the 1950s thru 1970s when suburban housing and commercial development at the perimeter dominated development. Not only businesses and residences moved out of Downtown, but rather educational, hospital, governmental and other professional services located nearer the perimeter of the city and town of Ithaca. The construction of parking garages, creation of The Commons, re-routing of traffic and construction of new retail spaces in the late 60's, 70's, and 80's were investments made to try to bolster the downtown. By the late 1980s and 1990s, a small return to the downtown began to emerge. Local governments began building new facilities downtown, TCCC located downtown and more recently office, hotel and cultural spaces have expanded. The piece that remains to be addressed is housing. There may be a connection between the sprawling development in the surrounding towns and villages, consuming more and more open space, and the failure to address residential housing options in and near the downtown for those who prefer to live in a more urbane environment. All of the pieces of the strategy for development need to continue to move forward.

Community leaders stepped forward in the late 1990's to revitalize Downtown Ithaca. With the support of the Mayor and the City Common Council, community leaders initiated several key steps. Like many cities nationally, they created a Business Improvement District (BID) and the Ithaca Downtown Partnership, whose charge was to take a comprehensive approach to downtown revitalization. Through the partnership they defined a ten-year strategic plan for downtown

development. Among its key components are new business development, expanded residential housing options, redirected traffic patterns, and redefining what Downtown Ithaca means in the future – a center for tourism, arts and culture, specialty shopping, and much more. A critical element to the future success of Downtown Ithaca, however, rests in engaging the broader community in defining and implementing the ten-year strategic plan. The Critical Issues Roundtable featuring Downtown has been one step in the expanding process of civic engagement.

Defining Our Relationships to Downtown and the Barriers That Keep Us Away

To understand the overall significance of Downtown Ithaca, we must first understand what Downtown means to us personally. Participants were asked to consider several questions: what would bring you to Downtown more often and what barriers keep you away from Downtown more than you are now? Most participants agreed their major reasons for coming Downtown include its being a specialty shopping area; a center for social, legal, and government services; and a cultural, meeting, or restaurant destination. A number of participants are residents of Downtown and value the convenience and ambiance of this experience. Barriers limiting people's involvement with Downtown focused on parking ease and quality, the proliferation of bars and limited business presence, perceptions of safety issues, limited selections and times of shopping options, deteriorating facilities/lack of overall beauty, and limited housing/living options. People praised the transportation system available in Tompkins County as one which facilitates access to Downtown. Overall, participants were enthusiastic in their regard for Downtown and enjoyed hearing each other's perspectives on Downtown.

Downtown's Role in the Region

Nationally, downtowns are enjoying resurgence as destinations for tourism, economic revitalization, and residential options, specifically among young professionals and affluent older adults. In keeping with these trends, Downtown Ithaca holds great promise in our region as a cultural, economic, and tourist center. Recent efforts by the Ithaca Downtown Partnership are laying the groundwork for these opportunities.

Participants were asked to define what they believed Downtown Ithaca's role in the region *should* be and what next steps are needed to bring this broader definition to reality. Generally, participants agreed that the definition for Downtown Ithaca is not clearly understood by local residents and that its definition should be more holistic, encompassing all the areas within the city limits, not just the currently defined Downtown Business Improvement District.

Considered in the broader framework, then, participants suggested that top priorities for Downtown's role in the region should center on Downtown Ithaca as a cultural, business, and tourism center (performing and visual arts, festivals, great restaurants, diversified and specialty shopping, recreation). Most agreed efforts supporting community beautification and signage are essential to achieving this transition. Other ideas for Downtown's role in the region included: the need for higher visibility and understanding among current residents of what Downtown Ithaca represents already; extended recreational resources (bike paths, the Waterfront Trail, parks, hiking areas, historical tours); extended and more uniform hours for Downtown shopping; central and more visible locations for publicizing community activities and events; and efforts to raise community pride. Concern was also expressed that new housing be created in a way that would address a variety of income levels.

Barriers to address in promoting Downtown as the hub for Ithaca and surrounding communities in Tompkins County rest on several factors: limited housing and a perception of Ithaca's being a "pleasant urban living experience;" challenging traffic patterns, perceptions of overall community safety, the mobility of the local workforce (over 14,000 commuters each day to our core

community, in part because of housing costs, while only 4000 leave the county for work), high taxes, and the lack of a cohesive “personality” or presence for the city. Overcoming these challenges will be essential to progress.

Results of the General Discussion: Downtown Ithaca’s Opportunities

Believing Downtown Ithaca is important represents the first step in Downtown’s future – and participants agreed that Downtown is essential to our area’s vitality. Defining Downtown in either concept or area remains a challenge for most people. Most roundtable participants expressed their beliefs that Downtown stretches far beyond The Commons and its adjacent areas. By expanding the definition, then, people were able to address their support of how Downtown Ithaca and Tompkins County could have a bright future. Most agreed there were several key steps to making this happen:

- a extensive communications, branding, and/or marketing campaign that helps *current* residents understand more clearly what Downtown Ithaca is, what it represents to them personally, and what it offers to others who might visit or relocate;
- continued discussions such as the roundtable where citizens are engaged in understanding *their* roles in moving the strategic plan for Downtown forward and how they can be involved in Downtown’s success;
- expanded urban living/housing options (more places to live, more affordable housing solutions, more shops available for daily necessities such as groceries and pharmaceuticals);
- an infusion of people, businesses, and activities that focus on Downtown resources and celebrate their presence (Cornell’s relocation of its 300 Alumni Affairs and Development staff, the new hotel, conferences, etc.);
- recognition that the communities of worship, an atmosphere of safety, the availability of child care and other family support services, and enhanced parking options are available for those who work and visit Downtown;
- progress in addressing legislative and political issues that inhibit the vitality of Downtown; and
- the necessity for our cultural community (theaters, artists, galleries, restaurants, etc.) to market themselves more holistically as a top-priority “tourist destination” for the region.

Participants strongly supported the need to have the community-at-large better informed about what opportunities can exist and how they as residents become engaged in helping to assure the success and vitality of Downtown Ithaca.

Next Steps

Community awareness and involvement are essential as efforts for Downtown Ithaca’s revitalization and resurgence moves forward. The comprehensive Ten-Year Plan is reflecting progress in attracting new businesses and economic development into the Downtown area. Just the facts that statistics are now being tracked and benchmarks established for growth represent a major undertaking of the Ithaca Downtown Partnership over the last four years. Much remains to be done, and a core piece of that now centers on arriving at consensus about “who and what” Downtown Ithaca will be in its future definitions, for it is these definitions that will direct the next stages of growth and emphasis. The results of the roundtable will be most helpful to the Ithaca Downtown Partnership as its plans its budgets and next series of activities related to revitalization and regional roles for Downtown Ithaca.

Forty-eight of the seventy-seven participants volunteered to help with future activities promoting the resurgence of Downtown Ithaca. Among their offers for involvement were leadership of key

committees or collaborative efforts; the Ithaca Downtown Partnership has already begun to engage these people and looks forward to many others becoming involved. To help broaden awareness, the Ithaca Downtown Partnership will make available its most recent reports on The Ten-Year Strategic Plan and other resource documents covering the progress of the last few years.

Summary and Thanks to All

The Critical Issues Roundtables represent a series of community-focused conversations hosted by the Community Foundation in its role as convener for exploring unmet or emerging needs and community-wide opportunities. The roundtables are intended to encourage more effective strategic decision-making and planning practices, promote positive results for our communities, and foster enlightened philanthropy. The Community Foundation invites others to co-host these meetings as a means of encouraging partnerships, fostering collaborative efforts, and identifying the natural leaders who are prepared to pursue the next steps. We applaud the Ithaca Downtown Partnership for its leadership and dedication to making our city a vital and viable center for those who live and work in Tompkins County.

Essential to this community discussion was the dedicated Planning Team whose work has covered many months and whose wisdom identified the main discussion points for the roundtable. These people are: **Eric Clay**, *Chair of the Grants Committee, Community Foundation of Tompkins County*; **Ian Colgan**, *Board member, Ithaca Downtown Partnership; resident representative*; **Gary Ferguson**, *Executive Director, Ithaca Downtown Partnership*; **Peg Hendricks**, *Executive Director, Community Foundation of Tompkins County*; **Joan Jurkowich**, *AICP, Deputy Commissioner of Planning, Tompkins County*; **Stephen C. Lipinski**, *Commercial Real Estate Specialist*; **Jean McPheeters**, *President, Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce*; **Bill Myers**, *President/CEO, AFCU; Vice Chair/Board of Directors, Community Foundation of Tompkins County*; **Mack Travis**, *Real Estate Developer; Board member, Ithaca Downtown Partnership*; **Susan Whitaker**, *Marketing Director, Ithaca Downtown Partnership*; and **Scott Whitham**, *Executive Director, Historic Ithaca; President of the Board, Ithaca Downtown Partnership*. In addition, we thank those who served as facilitators and scribes for each table's discussion.

On behalf of the Community Foundation of Tompkins County and the Ithaca Downtown Partnership, we thank all those who participated in the roundtable on ***Downtown: Does It Matter?***