

Downtown Idea Exchange

Walking & Recreation

Freshly expanded with new activities, park is central to downtown revival

Often, big breakthroughs in downtown revitalization efforts don't come in the form of great new buildings or even businesses, but rather in making great new public places.

For example, the Town of Hudson, MA (pop. 18,850), has been working on improving its downtown for over 12 years, and it's achieved a lot in that time. Many decrepit buildings along the main street have been gut-renovated, and downtown's once-seedy atmosphere has cleared up as undesirable

businesses, notably a rowdy biker bar, closed.

But Hudson's most significant triumph in reviving downtown is arguably the conversion of a former junkyard area into what is today a very active park, where the skateboard is the recreational vehicle of choice. The formerly run-down and dingy downtown is now a place where people come from miles around for good, clean fun.

"We've been systematically tackling different areas of the

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Design & Capital Improvements

Firehouse may be moved, remade as new activity center and focal point

If a classic old building is worth keeping — but it's in the wrong place — then moving it is an option well worth investigating.

And it's by no means a new, untested idea. In downtown Castle Rock, CO (pop. 44,000), the railroad agreed to donate an old depot it owned to the town, which in 1970 moved the building to a site off the tracks where it was restored in 1996 and today houses the Cas-

tle Rock Historical Museum, and is also its prime artifact.

"Moving off the site is a great way for public or private entities to take ownership of an old building like that," says architect Jim Fennell of Fennell Group. "It's certainly better than demolishing them. You could certainly build something new, but it would be very difficult to emulate the same

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Enhance downtown commuting options

As people look to drive less, commuting is becoming an important issue for more downtowners.

Mass transit is a valuable option for people who work and live in larger cities, but not every downtown is a New York or San Francisco.

Smaller downtowns can help people get around by establishing a free trolley service, giving downtowners complimentary or reduced fare bus passes, or lowering parking garage rates for carpoolers.

For those downtowns that do have a mass transit system, encourage businesses to participate in programs such as TransitCheck. This allows commuters to pay for transit with pre-tax dollars.

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downtown with public grant money and private partnerships. The park is the latest and greatest thing where we've really tried to think strategically about locating some facilities in the downtown that would draw people to the downtown," says Michelle Ciccolo, Hudson's director of community development.

Something for all ages

Cellucci Park was dedicated earlier this summer in memory of a longtime chairman of the city's economic development commission.

"We designed it to have something for all ages," Ciccolo says. "It has a skate park area for teenagers, a bocce court for the seniors, and playground equipment and a water splash pad for little ones. Then there's a gazebo pavilion where we can hold concerts and daytime arts programs and puppet shows — things to bring families downtown, but potentially also serve the lunch crowd as the town continues to revive itself." There's also a footbridge over the river, a

feature that people of all ages can appreciate.

Working with Hudson's Division of Recreation, the regional Arts Alliance has already organized a free summer entertainment series at the gazebo, and more events are in the works.

Step one: Cleaning up a dumping ground

Ten years ago, the park's land was a vacant dumping ground. The first acre, acquired by the town in the late 1990s in lieu of

back taxes, was overgrown and, despite being barricaded, was regularly littered with abandoned cars and other junk.

"We looked at raw land and where we had blight, and targeted those areas. We acquired the lot, and then got the old automobiles disposed of and cleaned it up," Ciccolo says. That riverside

parcel became the passive South Street Park.

"It was fine, but we had some picnic tables, and it was open space," she says. "That doesn't draw people that much. Because it's on the back side of the build-



Children at play in the splash area during the recent grand opening of Cellucci Park in downtown Hudson, MA.

ings, and the area is still a bit on the quieter side, there weren't that many people coming to have lunch there. We recognized that we needed to add some amenities to the park, make it a little bigger, and more interesting to bring people. That's what it's all about — driving the foot traffic. ”

Visioning paves way for grant funding

The town soon began planning an expansion of the new park.

“We're an old mill community, and about five years ago, we participated in a great state-sponsored public visioning process, where we had a landscape architecture and planning firm help us look at the properties, consider new concepts in zoning and where we'd want to locate things, and talk to the public to advance a dialog,” Ciccolo says.

“Then we'd take what we generated from the process and create sketches: What if we brought that skate park that people talked about downtown?” she says. “Having that visual piece helped enable us to take our cause to the various agencies that fund downtown redevelopment with grant money.”

“We opened up the views to the river, and we put in two components that did not exist anywhere in Hudson, a splash pad area and a skateboard park. The skateboard park was something that the kids in town had wanted for a number of years. I would get letters constantly about wanting one. But my thing was it really needed to be downtown and centrally located, where they could get to it easily. If you put it at the outskirts of Hudson, it's

New foot traffic has made skate park doubter a believer: Today's kids, tomorrow's adults

How effective has the remade Cellucci Park been so far as an enhancement to downtown Hudson, MA's foot traffic?

“Quite a bit. I bet it's added another 30 to 40 percent of foot traffic in downtown. It's amazing,” says Arthur Redding, president of the newly formed Hudson Business Association, chairman of the Town of Hudson Park Commission, and owner of the Hudson Appliance Center.

At first, he admits, “I honestly did not think it would work. I didn't think it was going to be a good enhancement to the business area. But I'll tell you what. It's been a grand slam since the day it opened. ... So far, I really think it's probably one of the best things that's happened in the downtown in quite a while.”

In that new foot traffic, “we see a lot of young couples walking. I've never seen so many baby carriages, little kids with their parents, people coming off the bike path, and so on. There are more people, and the more people we get to walk downtown, the more it gets to be an interesting area.”

The fun activities in the park also make downtown an area where great memories will be made by this generation of kids. In the long term, as those children become adults, downtown will benefit from those fond childhood memories, he says.

“Now we've got to give people the places to go besides just one location,” he says. To that end, the Hudson Business Association is actively recruiting new businesses to consider expanding or relocating downtown, and will be providing technical assistance to those that do. “There's a lot of stuff going on. Now we as businesspeople have to follow up and do our share.”

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impossible for a kid who doesn't drive a car to get to,” says Linda Ghiloni, director of the Division of Recreation. “It's easier for a parent to drop a child off on the main street, to have them walk downtown and not in a remote area.”

In 2005, the city purchased a one-acre parcel adjacent to the old park for \$150,000, \$65,000 of which was reimbursed through a state grant.

Costs ran over \$1 million for

the new expanded park, including land acquisition, \$195,000 for the skatepark, which is essentially a subterranean concrete bowl, and \$110,000 for the splashpad, which incorporates an \$87,000 water recirculation system. \$760,000 in grants came from the state's Department of Housing and Community Development and Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs. The town and local donors provided the remaining funds.

Public reception to new park is spectacular

The skatepark was completed about a year ago, and kids flocked to it before its grass was even planted. Sometimes, the skateboarding “kids” are 20-somethings and 30-somethings, like a young man from Rhode Island who asked the recreation director for a restaurant recommendation, and pledged to return with his wife and kids thanks to the water splash park.

“He is such a case in point of exactly what we’re trying to achieve here,” Ciccolo says.

Now with the splash park added, “if the sun is shining and it’s warm out, there are kids there in the splash area, and it is just precious to see,” she says. “People are thrilled, and it’s extremely close to the bike path that we built — we have a bike path that comes in through the downtown.”

Right next to the park, the town is also completing the upgrade of a key public parking lot for downtown businesses. The grant-funded \$500,000 improvement includes landscaping, paving, granite curbing, and installation of decorative period lighting to match the lighting on the main street.

“This is all part of looking comprehensively at, how do we draw people? How do we upgrade our amenities and make downtown appealing?” The essential lesson, she says, is “To think comprehensively and long term. ... You really do need to think comprehensively and work collaboratively. We wouldn’t have been able to do all the projects that we’ve done without the business community, but I don’t think we could have

done them without the government, either. We’ve had a ton of money come into the town through grants that we’ve written in our office.”

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Firehouse may be moved, remade as new activity center and focal point

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character that the older buildings have. It’s usually a different construction style,” which would be prohibitively expensive today.

Currently, in downtown Colorado Springs, CO (pop. 60,890), the fire department has outgrown its two-bay, 1926 firehouse, but can’t afford to buy new land.

Fennell, who was hired by the fire department to design its new station, suggests relocating the old fire house to a center island between traffic lanes of a main corridor into downtown.

Remade as a lively restaurant, brewpub, or some other activity generator, the firehouse would anchor and strengthen the downtown gateway area and an already-planned pedestrian promenade, and complement a 27-story high-rise planned for the adjacent block.

“We’ve tried to acquire property to buy a new station in the downtown area, and we just can’t find a suitable building site that’s within our budget,” says Dan

Raider, deputy chief, Colorado Springs Fire Department.

To ensure the viability of moving the old station to clear land that the city already owns, Mega Movers, a specialist moving company, looked at the building and confirmed that they’d be able to do the job.

“This is an 80-year-old building that’s all reinforced, load-bearing masonry. We can have the company come in, jack the building up, put wheels underneath, roll it to a new site, and preserve it,” says Fennell.

Development community is receptive to idea

Having verified that the 500-ton firehouse can be moved, “we began to talk to people about how we might be able to use that old building as a magnet for people to come into the downtown area,” Raider says. Then more formally, the city’s procurement office put out a request for information to the development community. Five developers had responded at press time.

In Fennell’s mind, the optimum location for the old firehouse is right in the middle of downtown’s main east-west corridor, Pike’s Peak Avenue, which has five lanes of traffic with parking on both sides and leads to the famous



Web Extras

To view the Request for Information seeking letters of interest from developers to relocate and redevelop the old fire station, and related documents about this idea including site plan drawings, visit www.DowntownDevelopment.com and click on Web Extras.