

P E N N S Y L V A N I A  
DOWNTOWN CENTER

Testimony of Timothy H. Dempsey  
Executive Director  
Pennsylvania Downtown Center

Testimony Before  
*Transportation/Commerce & Economic Development*  
*Joint Public Hearing*

Thursday, September 16, 1999  
Harrisburg

Good morning Mr. Chairmen and members of the committees. My name is Tim Dempsey; I am the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Downtown Center (PDC). I would like to thank you for providing me with this opportunity to comment on the issue of transportation and how it relates to economic development. Before I do that, however, I would like to take a moment to provide you with some brief background on my organization.

The Pennsylvania Downtown Center is the Commonwealth's only statewide nonprofit solely dedicated to the issue of downtown and neighborhood business district revitalization. Working as a partner with the Department of Community & Economic Development since 1987, PDC has provided assistance to the ninety-three communities funded through the State's Main Street Commercial Revitalization Program. By providing technical assistance, outreach services, and educational programs, our organization has enabled communities to develop and execute successful downtown revitalization efforts. In addition, our organization has assisted over one hundred communities not funded through the State's official program.

The issue of transportation as it relates to economic development in our downtowns is a very complex and hotly debated topic. Issues ranging from the impact of constructing new highway by-passes around downtowns to the lack of adequate public transportation have been discussed for many years. My goal here today is not to rehash the debate over these perennial issues, but rather to focus on the concepts that downtown economic development requires unique transportation systems and that concrete steps can be taken to facilitate development of those systems.

The physical model of the city before the widespread use of the automobile was pedestrian oriented. Workers, consumers, and visitors in downtown moved about locally on foot, while being provided regional access via public transportation, i.e. the trolleys and trains that once ran through our cities. As a result of this physical model, the economic model of downtown followed suit. Businesses clustered together in tightly knit districts to accommodate pedestrians. The high level of foot traffic thus became an

essential component for supporting a thriving central business district where densities were high.

As automobile use became more widespread, residential and commercial location decisions reflected the increased mobility of our nation. Businesses could now locate in areas beyond the traditional commercial centers, no longer as dependent on pedestrian activity but increasingly dependent on automobile traffic. Many businesses that remained downtown suffered as the sidewalks emptied. To address this shift in the increased mobility of consumers and goods, many downtowns and Main Streets gave priority to the automobile. While a shift in focus to expedite vehicular movement improved traffic flow and ease of access, changes were often brought about with less and less consideration for the pedestrian, in some cases hindering, discouraging, or even preventing pedestrian movement.

As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we need to examine closely how we can adjust transportation policy to regenerate economic activity in our downtowns. Three initiatives that need to be undertaken include the following:

1. Create physical environments that accommodate automobiles but place safe and efficient pedestrian movement as the top transportation priority in downtowns.
2. Encourage a greater linkage between transportation and comprehensive land use planning.
3. Continue to develop and encourage alternative modes of transportation that ease congestion and support downtown pedestrian activity.

If you were to examine any successful downtown or Main Street you would discover that pedestrian movement is given priority. The reason for this is clear - pedestrian activity creates a domino effect: increased retail and service activity leads to demand for property which results in higher real estate values, all of which mean an improvement in quality of life which further attracts major employers and residents. By carefully evaluating and, when necessary, altering such elements as one-way streets, excessive speed limits, and the lack of crosswalks, communities can stimulate pedestrian activity.

While some downtowns require major changes, most only require a creative application of transportation guidelines that allow for flexible solutions – solutions that place a priority on pedestrians and recognize that fast and efficient automobile movement should not always be the top priority.

We also need to evaluate transportation and its relationship to land use planning. As I stated earlier, there has been a great deal of debate on issues such as the impact of highway by-passes on existing commercial districts. While there have been many by-pass studies assessing impact after the fact, we often fail to analyze the economic impact before it occurs. We must do a better job of understanding the link between new commercial development and its impact on existing commercial centers and how transportation decisions affect those linkages. With so many existing commercial centers in decline, can we continue to justify the ongoing construction of new highways and roads that may ultimately lead to the decline in the infrastructure investments we have already made? This does not mean we stop growth and limit improvements in transportation capacity, rather, it means that we reinvest in existing infrastructure where transportation already exists.

Related to issue of land use is our need to encourage alternative modes of transportation. As traffic continues to grow in communities of all sizes and we spend more time in our cars than ever before, we need creative solutions to ease congestion. Unfortunately, large-scale use of public transportation is not likely anytime soon. The continued low density development patterns and our marriage to the automobile are major factors limiting widespread use of public transit. However, proposals such as the Schuylkill Valley Metro from Reading to Philadelphia should be encouraged and supported. This proposed line, with potential stops nearby struggling downtowns, offers a tremendous opportunity to reduce traffic and stimulate local economic development in existing business districts. In addition to public transportation, alternative modes such as bicycling should continue to be examined and accommodated where appropriate.

There are many factors that have played a role in the economic decline of our downtowns and transportation is just one factor involved in this complex problem. Unlike so many other factors, however, transportation has a unique ability to help solve the problem of downtown disinvestment. With innovative transportation planning in our downtowns that facilitates pedestrian movement, development of comprehensive strategies that accommodate economic sustainability in all commercial areas, and the sensible application of alternative modes of transportation, we can stimulate economic development in our traditional business districts. Our downtowns and Main Streets once served as the economic hubs of our communities. While many may never do so again, we can none the less create viable and sustainable commercial centers that reflect their important position as the heart and identity of our communities.

Mr. Chairmen, I would like to thank you for your time this afternoon and would be happy to entertain any questions.