

downtown now!

Downtown needs an infusion of funding



Chris Hand
downtown columnist

What a difference six years makes. During the 2011 Jacksonville elections, mayoral and City Council candidates debated whether Downtown development should be a priority.

One contender was even criticized in a negative TV ad for his plans to boost economic activity in the city center.

- In 2017, the debate is over.
- Brooklyn's empty lots have become a true work/live/play neighborhood with offices and housing, dining, fitness and retail options.
 - Our sports complex now provides a unique stadium experience, including a long-sought amphitheater.
 - The city has approved the renovation of the historic Laura Street Trio.
 - Planned game-changing projects like The District and Shipyards have the potential to transform our Downtown riverfront.

KEEP THE ENGINE RUNNING

This momentum is encouraging. But like any engine, Downtown revitalization needs a constant supply of fuel to keep running. Unfortunately, the city agency charged with overseeing Downtown revival is nearing an empty gas tank.

In August 2012, the Jacksonville City Council unanimously approved the creation of the Downtown Investment Authority. A board of nine community members and a small team of professional staff run the DIA. Their work is crucial to the city center's forward progress.

Yet the DIA has little investment funding to prime the pump on additional Downtown development. The City Council should rectify that worrisome deficiency in this year's budget process.

As the DIA website states, the "Downtown Investment Authority was created to revitalize Jacksonville's urban core by utilizing Community Redevelopment Area resources to spur economic development."

Community Redevelopment Areas are tools that local communities use to rejuvenate neighborhoods. Once one is created, the city caps the property values in that neighborhood for the tax revenue it collects and directs additional revenue gained from property value increases to the Community Redevelopment Area for revitalization activities.

Downtown has two: The Southbank Community Redevelopment Area is financially positive. But the Northbank one is in the red through no fault of its own.

Though the city subsidized the construction of parking garages in the sports complex and at the new Duval County Courthouse for use by the entire community, it has required the Northbank Community Redevelopment Area to carry the hefty annual costs of those subsidies.

In next year's proposed budget, that expense load is nearly \$4 million.

While the public is understandably focused on major initiatives like the District and Shipyards, large-scale projects take

City Council members must give the Downtown Investment Authority the funds needed to help keep the engine roaring.

years to complete. Downtown revitalization also depends on a steady stream of smaller successes, but the DIA can't achieve those successes without adequate resources.

Fortunately, the upcoming City Council budget process offers an opportunity to put fuel back in the engine of Downtown development. If council members want to help Downtown realize its full potential, they should consider taking three steps during their fiscal review.

THREE STEPS FOR PROGRESS

First, council should move the parking garage subsidies from the Northbank Community Redevelopment Area budget to the city's general fund budget. Such a transfer would better reflect the communitywide purpose of those facilities and could provide the DIA with nearly \$4 million to invest in Downtown revitalization — an amount that would continue to grow in future years as new economic activity adds additional revenues.

Second, the city should forgive any amounts it has "loaned" to the Northbank Community Redevelopment Area in the last two fiscal years to cover budget shortfalls caused by the parking garage expenses. In the proposed budget, the DIA "owes" the city's general fund approximately \$1.4 million in the next fiscal year — \$1.1 million for "debt" repayment and another \$300,000 in new obligations.

If the city were to cancel this amount, the DIA could have even more financial ability to create Downtown jobs and boost urban core economic development.

Third, council should replenish its depleted Historic Preservation Trust Fund.

In the last two years, the City of Jacksonville has committed historic preservation dollars to restore the Laura Street Trio, renovate the century-old Lerner Building for use as Florida State College at Jacksonville (FSCJ) student housing and revitalize the iconic Bostwick Building so it can host the new Cowford Chophouse.

If City Council wants DIA to revive other historic Downtown structures like the former Jones Furniture, Federal Reserve and Exchange buildings, then it should provide new preservation funds in this year's budget.

Mayor Lenny Curry has commendably included funding in his proposed budget for important Downtown capital projects. Now it is up to City Council to complement the mayor's capital commitment by providing DIA with the investment fuel needed to keep Downtown revitalization moving forward.

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■ Hand and former Florida Gov. and U.S. Sen. Bob Graham are co-authors of "America, the Owner's Manual."

viewpoint

Downtown has a week for the ages



You don't often read the words "breakthrough" or "game-changer" on these pages. We're not trying to give people false hope.

Yet the announcement of the plans for the District on the Southbank truly qualify, just as much as the plans for the Shipyards property across the river on the Northbank.

In fact, the announcement of a 200-room hotel for the Peter Rummell property qualifies as a Thumbs Up of its own.

And so does the proposal to bring a grocery store to the Southbank.

And the plans for the first movie theater Downtown in years.

But the hotel will be the first Downtown since 2001, reported the Times-Union.

Michael Munz, a partner on the project, promises it will have an "edgy vibe."

The District will include:

- 1,170 residential units.
- 285,500 square feet of office space.
- A 125-slip marina.
- Public access via a riverfront public park.

The property is on JEA's old Southside Generating Station next to the School Board building.

And if people are wondering why the School Board building is on prime riverfront land, it wasn't so prime when it was built there; it was industrial. The School Board owns the building outright and hasn't found a better deal elsewhere.

With all the activity next-door, perhaps that day will come sooner rather than later.

None of this could happen without JEA cleaning the property of its toxic wastes. Just about all the riverfront property Downtown used to be industrial and therefore has waste issues.

All of this proves that the old Jacksonville curse, "great potential," is a thing of the past.

THE JAGS KEEP MOVING ON UP



The value of the Jacksonville Jaguars continues to skyrocket. The franchise has an estimated value of nearly \$2 billion now.

According to rankings from Forbes, the Jaguars rank as the No. 42 most valuable sports franchise in the U.S., ahead of the Kansas City Chiefs, New Orleans Saints and Cleveland Browns, Cincinnati Bengals and Detroit Lions, among others.

Forbes figures the value of the Jags franchise has more than doubled since Shad Khan bought the team from Wayne Weaver.

That's good for the city, as well.

HEY MILLENNIALS, GO DOWNTOWN!



What Downtown needs is some young people. They come for education. They come for nightlife. Colleges provide both.

And so a big Thumbs Up for the announcement that the University of North Florida will be opening an Entrepreneurship Center Downtown next year.

That center will be consistent with the One Spark vibe. It will use some Downtown office space.

As the Times-Union reported, UNF already has a major presence Downtown with its ownership of the Museum of Contemporary Art.

The Entrepreneurship Center will send a signal that Downtown is not only open for business, but it is the place to be.



While we're at it, another big Thumbs Up for Florida State College at Jacksonville, which will be holding graduate-level courses Downtown, starting Aug. 28, on the 18th floor of the SunTrust Tower.

Of course, FSCJ already has a major presence with a variety of facilities at its Downtown campus. Also FSCJ will be opening a leased building Downtown for student housing, another major step forward for Downtown as a neighborhood.

But this will be more than just housing. There will be a cafe on the ground floor where culinary students can show off their expertise.

Now it is the city's job to make the surrounding area of the SunTrust Tower more inviting for students.

BOLD CITY BREWERY

When the Bold City Brewery was closed and then reopened, it qualifies as a Thumbs Up for both the city and the owner-operators of the Roselle Street taproom.

As reported in the Times-Union, city inspectors realized that Bold City Brewery was closed by fire inspectors because

the facility was not approved to hold so many customers. It seems the yoga classes on the site were largely at fault.

Yoga classes could have held as many as 300 people there, yet there were not fire alarms and lighted exits. The taproom was reopened without the yoga and so long as no more than 40 people were there at once.

Now Roselle Street is not Downtown, but every Downtown must have lots of thriving neighborhoods nearby.

Lots of trees – but where is the shade?



This stretch of Water Street leads to the Times-Union Center for the Performing Arts. Did you ever notice the trees? They provide no shade! The palm trees near the Charles Bennett Federal Building are worthless for people trying to stay out of summer heat and rain. The crape myrtles in the median are no help. The palms need to be replaced with native trees. (Mike Clark/Florida Times-Union)

Time to throw some shade on Downtown



This sidewalk near the CSX Building shows how shade can make all the difference to walkers. So how difficult is this? You plant shade trees near sidewalks and, Voila!, walkers are protected from heat and rain. No wonder people say in their cars when the streetscapes are so uninviting. (Mike Clark/Florida Times-Union)

Curry's budget offers a brighter future – so it's time to stop obsessing over the past, mayor



Ron Littlepage
times-union columnist

This will probably earn me a hot spot in a special category even beyond Lenny Curry's oft-mentioned and despised "critics and cynics," but I'm going to say it anyway: Give it a rest, mayor.

While presenting his proposed budget to the City Council earlier this week, Curry once again spent way too much time denigrating his predecessor, Alvin Brown.

Without naming Brown, Curry basically said the Brown administration had destroyed Jacksonville and that Curry and his team rode to the rescue to resurrect the city through their brilliance and financial acumen.

This is getting tiresome as Curry enters the third year of his term. It's also unseemly for a mayor to continue to beat up a vanquished foe. And it wasn't necessary.

Curry and his team have put together a good budget, one that would stand on its own without taking shots at Brown.

Some of the things that allowed for a strong budget were out of Curry's control.

The improving economy means rising property values that will produce an extra \$35 million in property tax revenues over the current budget year.

The city also is expected to get an extra \$5 million in revenue from taxes collected by the state.

Other money, however, has been freed up by the pension reform plan Curry pushed, and he deserves credit for that.

But the bottom line is that when revenues are growing, it's much easier to put a budget together that pleases various factions.

Curry and his team have chosen some solid priorities.

Downtown is clearly on the move, and Curry is right to propose spending \$8 million to finally demolish the old county courthouse and old city hall.

Doing that and providing the money to complete the Liberty Street repair project will make available an attractive piece of riverfront property that will be ripe for development, perhaps for a public/private

partnership for a new convention center.

Other monies for landscaping and lighting improvements Downtown, both needed to make Downtown more inviting, also would be wise investments.

Curry is also right to propose spending on the city's aging infrastructure.

The neglect goes back before Brown was mayor when the Great Recession and rising pension costs cut infrastructure spending to the bone.

Curry wants to spend \$131 million on capital projects spread throughout the city. That would mean new sidewalks, better parks and improved roads, among other things.

The final outcome of that spending won't be known until the City Council, especially through the work of its Finance Committee, begins debating the needs of the different neighborhoods.

But having the money to divvy up is far better than having almost none at all.

However, \$100 million of that capital spending would come from borrowed money, which some council members who prefer a pay-as-you-go approach instead

of taking on more debt could have a problem with.

Following one of his campaign promises, Curry also set aside a sizeable part of his proposed budget for public safety.

The Jacksonville Fire and Rescue Department would get more positions and new equipment.

And the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office would get 100 new officers that would add to the 80 new officers funded in Curry's previous two budgets.

Curry and Sheriff Mike Williams argue that JSO is spread too thin and that's why the city's murder rate is so high.

Others argue that a city can't police its way out of a violent crime problem.

Although Curry also wants to invest in prevention and intervention programs, especially for children, the bulk of the overall budget is going to fund JSO.

The City Council, which must pass a budget by the end of September, will have the final say on how those different approaches are financed.