Revitalizing Downtown Jacksonville: Fifty Years in the Making

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The revitalization of Downtown Jacksonville has been at the top of the business, civic, and political agenda for the last fifty years, but with the recent creation of the Downtown Investment Authority (DIA) Board, the effort to revitalize Jacksonville's Downtown may finally be gaining momentum. To appreciate why the City of Jacksonville will be watching the DIA in the upcoming months to see if this is initiative that will rejuvenate Downtown, it is important to recognize the long history of revitalization efforts dating back to the 1960s. With focus and resolve, the DIA may just be able to solve some of the problems that their predecessors could not.

Beginning in the 1960s, the City of Jacksonville succumbed to the national trend of suburbanization where the City's residents opted to shop, work, and live in suburban Jacksonville in lieu of downtown—a trend that continued through both the 1970s and 1980s. [i] In the 1960s, the revitalization effort focused on drawing Jacksonvilleans back into Downtown to shop, work, and live. *Id.* As part of its approach, the Jacksonville-Duval Area Planning Board even proposed the use of city funds to create a hovercraft system to move people and cars between the banks of the St. Johns River and Downtown—an idea that unfortunately did not come into fruition. *Id.*

The 1970s marked another decade – and another plan – for the revitalization of Downtown. *Id.* In recognition of the challenges ahead, the City explored the idea of establishing a Downtown Development Authority, and even worked with a Baltimore-based city planning consultant to develop a solution involving '"in-town high-rise" apartment complexes bounded by concentric circles of one-way streets in Jacksonville's central business district," in conjunction with "upper-level walkways" for easy pedestrian navigation downtown. *Id.* Neither of these plans was enacted and the 1970s ended without substantial progress to the revitalization of Downtown.

In the 1980s, the approach to revitalize Downtown hinged on "large projects that would serve as catalysts for change," such as Metropolitan Park and The Jacksonville Landing. *Id.* While celebrated additions to Downtown, these two projects alone were not enough to spur a significant revitalization of Downtown. *Id.* The 1980s concept of establishing a single initiative to bring about change culminated with The River City Renaissance program of 1993, which allocated $238 million for riverfront development and is often referred to as the first large-scale effort to revitalize Downtown. *Id.*

In 2000, Downtown Vision, Inc. (DVI), a not-for-profit organization, was formed by, and at the request of, Downtown commercial property owners. [ii] DVI's mission is "to build and maintain a healthy and vibrant Downtown community and to promote Downtown as an exciting place to live, work, play, and visit." *Id.* The establishment of DVI marked Jacksonville's first

Business Improvement District (BID), "a ninety-block neighborhood in which property owners tax themselves to make their community cleaner, safer, and more vibrant." *Id.* The City funded the BID via an ad valorem tax on Downtown Properties. Geedes, *supra*. As of 2003, DVI focused their efforts on the Baby Boomers, with DVI executive director Terry Lorince predicting that aging adults would exchange the strip malls of suburbia in favor of urban living as soon as retirement set in and their children left home. *Id.* The year 2000 also marked the City Council's adoption of the Downtown Master Plan to "address parking, Downtown identity, public safety and to further open up the St. Johns River to public access." *Id.* Articulating the trend in the approach to the revitalization of Downtown, Lorince said, "It's not going to be one big project that will make Downtown . . . It's shifted to, how do we strategically plan three or four projects that will give us more bang for our buck?" *Id.*

At the end of 2010, the Jacksonville Civic Council was established to further address the revitalization of Downtown.[iii] As one of its first items of business, the Council recommended the creation of a Downtown Development Authority to determine how the City can capitalize on the vacant land and underused buildings Downtown. *Id.* In 2011, the creation of a Downtown Development Authority and continued revitalization efforts were center-stage as a major component of Mayor Alvin Brown's campaign platform.[iv]

The progress towards the revitalization of Downtown continues as August 15, 2012, marked the creation of the Downtown Investment Authority (DIA) by the Jacksonville City Council.[v] The purpose of the DIA is to act as an independent entity "that will have the authority to negotiate Downtown development deals." *Id.* After selecting and establishing the DIA board members, the DIA's first task will be to issue requests for proposals (RFQs) to engage planning consultants to develop and implement a strategic plan for Downtown. *Id.* Despite the requested budget of $29 million, the DIA is allocated $2 million beneath the Office of Economic Development to begin its work. *Id.* The DIA is composed of a total of nine members: four nominated by the city council president and five nominated by Mayor Alvin Brown. *Id.* A DIA board member must be a Duval County resident with ties to Downtown, where six out of the nine board members must be one of the following: an architect or urban planner; a practicing attorney; a person with a commercial real estate background; a person with business management experience; a downtown resident; a Downtown; a Downtown property owner involved in the banking or finance industry; and a Downtown retail operator.[vi] The board members were confirmed on October 9, 2012, and held their first meeting on October 17, 2012. *Id.*

Though blindly supportive, the business community has expressed concern that this entity *du jour* can resolve the most important problems facing Jacksonville's Downtown- issues such as:

> **Utilizing waterfront property with a strong tax contributor-** Following the lead of many up and coming cities hoping to allure corporate headquarters, can the City of Jacksonville recruit companies Downtown by utilizing undeveloped or abandoned waterfront properties owned by the City? If a corporate headquarters is not the answer than maybe a waterfront convention center is? I've even heard rumblings of a waterfront

casino, but I doubt the political forces that call the shots in this city would ever allow that to happen.

Incentivizing mixed-use development and retail- Tax breaks and governmental support to mixed-use developers is historically an excellent vehicle for revitalizing struggling areas and spurring economic development. Benefits include:

•Prompts revitalization & encourages economic investment
•Encourages high quality design by providing both greater flexibility and more control
•Promotes a village-style mix of retail, restaurants, offices, civic uses, and multi-family housing
•Provides more housing opportunities and choices
•Enhances an area's unique identity and development potential (e.g., village centers, locations near bike paths, or "gateway" areas that announce a community's strengths)
•Promotes pedestrian & bicycle travel
•Reduces auto dependency, roadway congestion, and air pollution by co-locating multiple destinations
•Promotes a sense of community
•Promotes efficient use of land and infrastructure
•Increases revenues

With increased retail and mixed-use options, it follows that Jacksonville's commercial workforce will opt to stay in the city and become Downtown residents if those retail options and conveniences of cosmopolitan living can be enjoyed safely and efficiently.

Creating a safe and pedestrian friendly commerce grid- Safe and walkable streets that lead to prospering businesses are truly a condition precedent to addressing any parking or residential living problem that Downtown Jacksonville faces.

Vibrant and strong urban cores are magnets for attracting and retaining people, especially the young, talented, knowledge workers businesses are eager to hire. Communities that are safe places to live and work, and that are rich in culture, and recreational, or social outlets are important ingredients in the recipe for building a prosperous economic future for Jacksonville. It is my hopes that this newest governmental authority will continue to leverage resources of our local and state government, the many assets of our community, and the support of business and community groups, to further redevelop and revitalize Jacksonville's Downtown.

Tags: Administrative Law and Licensing; Corporate Formations and Operations

i Ryan Geddes, *Downtown of the Future*, Jacksonville Business Journal (Jul. 12, 2004, 12:00 AM), http://www.bizjournals.com/jacksonville/stories/2004/07/12/focus1.html?page=all.

ii *Who is Downtown Vision, Inc.*, Downtown Vision, Inc., http://downtownjacksonville.org/downtownvisioninc/whoweare.aspx.

iii Ashley Gurbal Kritzer, *Jacksonville leaders seeking economic development support*, Jacksonville Business Journal (Apr. 13, 2012, 6:00 AM) http://www.bizjournals.com/jacksonville/print-edition/2012/04/13/jacksonville-leaders-seeking-economic.html?page=all.

iv David Bauerlein, *Brown, Hogan differ on need for downtown development authority*, Jacksonville.com, http://jacksonville.com/business/2011-04-09/story/brown-hogan-differ-need-downtown-development-authority.

v Ashley Gurbal Kritzer, *With DIA approved, city will issue RFP for help with Downtown Plan*, Jacksonville Business Journal (Aug. 15, 2012, 8:15 PM) http://www.bizjournals.com/jacksonville/news/2012/08/15/with-dia-approved-city-will-issue-rfp.html.

vi *Jacksonville's Downtown Investment Authority Board Officially Formed*, First Coast News (Oct. 15, 2012 2:06 PM) http://www.firstcoastnews.com/news/article/278150/3/Jacksonvilles-Downtown-Investment-Authority-Board-officially-formed.