

## The View from Main Street - By Michael Givler, Main Street Manager, Coatesville, PA

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**C**an downtown retail compete with the mall?

The answer is- yes and no! So much for a simple answer.



Over the past four decades the retail history of downtowns across America has been one of declining business. In the small downtown Coatesville, where I work, we had a J. C. Penny, Sears, Woolworth's, J.J Newberry, and a dozen or more locally owned jewelry and clothing stores. J.C. Penny and Sears changed to the big department store model, Woolworth's and Newberry's are in "Five & Dime Heaven", and the locally owned stores either went to the mall or most just went out of business. So how do traditional downtowns compete?

Downtowns can't compete with malls from the standpoint of big anchor stores. Large department stores are just not coming back into small downtowns, at least not in their present form. Small downtowns can't compete with the marketing power of malls. The mall owners and the chain stores that inhabit the malls of America spend millions in advertising to entice you to come to them. Small downtowns will never have the parking that malls provide unless you remove much of the available retail space to make room for parking. What would be the sense in that?

The good news is that in many ways social and economic factors are making downtowns more attractive. According to [CNN Money](#), the mall shopper of today is spending 20% less time in the mall and there is a substantial decrease in mid-week traffic. Why? My belief it is because many women (let's face it, women are the shoppers of the world) work, and traveling to the mall cuts into the time they want to spend on other activities and eats up valuable family time.

Another factor is every mall is basically the same. Sure they may look



different in appearance but every mall I have been in across the U.S.A. has basically the same stores. There is little uniqueness in malls and the novelty of malls in the 60's and 70's has waned. Some older malls are now becoming "gray fields" and unless they are spruced up will go the way if of old industrial sites.

This is where downtowns come in. Every downtown has a unique history, unique buildings, a diverse population, and above all a sense of place. Downtowns are where people live. People don't live in malls. More and more people are making the conscious choice to live in urban settings. If you have the choice to walk out your door and buy your shoes from the shop next door or to get into your car and drive to the mall for the same shoes I believe I know which choice people would usually make.

Another factor is most downtown stores are owner operated while most mall stores are manned by mostly part-time workers earning a few bucks at a second job. Who do you think will give you better service?

Have you noticed lately that some malls are trying to look like a downtown? In Exton, PA, near Coatesville, they even call their outdoor mall "Downtown Exton." Narrow streets, sidewalk cafes, 15 to 20 foot wide storefronts, and on-street parking are all part of the design. I call it the Disney Downtown. Shortly after 10 PM there is not a soul around and there is certainly no one living behind those fancy false facades.

There is hope for small town retail. Convenience, service, uniqueness, and a sense of place are some of the factors that will make small towns the destinations they once were. If you are a small town business owner, contact your SBDC and let them assist you in planning for your future.



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