

Our Changing Economy

Shabby Downtown Calls for Dreamer

By Philip Stoddard Brown

VISITORS to Washington must be puzzled by the old and ugly buildings in the downtown business area. Some buildings are entirely vacant; others have only ground-floor tenants. By and large, the area is a hodgepodge of unrelated and unsightly structures.

One might have supposed that the north border of the White House-Capitol axis would be very valuable property. Where else in the United States is a commercial area guarded at each end by such revered symbols of democracy? Where else is land so assured of future value?

One might have expected the great complex of high-density office buildings in the Federal Triangle from Sixth Street to Fifteenth Street would have induced the construction of beautiful stores and office buildings on the north side of Pennsylvania Avenue, and the building of many fine apartment houses on the northern fringe of the business district.

Instead, the downtown area south of New York Avenue has deteriorated in value since World War II. Assessments in many cases have fallen. Only a handful of buildings have been constructed in this area, which is the core of Washington.

Shift Or Leap-Frog

Driving along Pennsylvania Avenue—where foreign dignitaries are escorted in parade—one views a succession of buildings and parking lots as motley and shabby as one can see in the most economically depressed coal and textile cities of Pennsylvania and Massachusetts.

Once an area begins to deteriorate, the deterioration goes on and on. Builders don't combat it; they shift to the fringes or leap-frog to other areas . . . Only when decay has gone so far, and the attraction of competing office and shopping areas has taken away so much business, as to jeopardize huge investments does fear sometimes induce property owners, and businessmen to bestir themselves.

The central business district of Washington has reached this stage of devolution. Lower Connecticut Avenue has become the prestige office area. The largest private office building in Washington is near completion and others are underway in this area; more stores and restaurants will open in the ensuing year. The magnificent new mall and town center in the Southwest, on which work is to start this fall, may lure many resident shoppers and tourists away from the central business district. The Cultural Center to be built in Foggy Bottom will be another lure.

As is so often the case in the business world, fear of great loss dictates a drastic, and possibly radical, remedy. The boldest actions are often taken when bankruptcy threatens.

Even at this late stage, a well conceived redevelopment of the central business district almost certainly would be a financial success if the transportation problem were properly resolved. Washington is growing rapidly. There will be a need for even more Federal and private office buildings. There will be more residents and tourists to cater to.

Large Builders Available

An integrated, well-designed central business district, east of the financial community on Fifteenth Street, would surely halt, or slow down, the movement to the Lower Connecticut Avenue area where traffic congestion is growing and where most of the new buildings have no architectural distinction or functional relationship one to another. They are simply the conventional, seemingly safe, follow-the-market type.

(With all the downtown construction of recent years, there have been few leader-type, pace-setting developments that greatly enhance and give distinctive character to a particular area. This is remarkable because there are quite a few large builders and wealthy investors in Washington, capable of planning and financing groups of related buildings. The bold, long-view projects now underway in Areas B and C of the vast Southwest Redevelopment are being planned and financed by out-of-town investors.)

The Downtown Committee has raised much of its \$400,000 budget to finance a two-year study of the central business district. Persons are being interviewed for the directorship of this study. The National Capital Planning Commission is already making detail surveys.

What will come of all this? Will it turn out to be a spot-improvement, face-saving operation, or a truly imaginative and constructive reshaping of the whole area from the White House to the Capitol, or something in between?

Some civic leaders are willing to go all out: to give the new director great freedom; to establish a private corporation with enough capital to buy, sell and lease large blocks of properties in order to implement whatever plans are approved; to recommend the full exercise of all the powers of government—to close off streets, condemn, rezone and impose many architectural and other restrictions.

The Downtown Committee and its chief sponsor, the Federal Advisory Council, have done a good job of creating a climate of readiness and of financing the initial planning. The plans that emerge in the next two or three years will depend upon the imagination and pride of the community—and upon how free and stimulating the exchange of ideas is.

Now is the time for dreamers—for those with a vision of a great and beautiful central city—to voice their ideas. After 150 years, the area between the White House and the Capitol is once again the frontier of Washington.



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