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How We See It: Downtown Revitalization Efforts Gain Steam

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Can government revitalize a part of town that's seen its heyday fade into memory?

That's one of the questions being asked in communities across the nation whose leaders want to breathe new life into parts of town that still have a lot to offer, but where that potential is a little harder to realize.

Rogers and Springdale are two prime examples in Northwest Arkansas. Their downtowns have suffered as business interests and consumer behavior contributed to a shift of focus to other commercial and retail venues. But there's a new level of interest and, dare we say, excitement for the possibilities of rejuvenation and revival.

We'll answer our opening question: No, government cannot revitalize downtowns. But it can provide a catalyst to get things moving.

Last week, Rogers resident got to see some of the plans for downtown arising from Gateway Planning, a consulting company hired by the city to bring together the ideas of residents, business owners, government leaders and others to create a blueprint for revitalization.

"This is amazing," one attendee said of the vision.

When's the last time anyone said that about the potential future of downtown Rogers?

Gateway is helping to cast a vision for the possibilities. From attracting new residents to downtown to developing an entertainment district to improving the Walnut corridor to make the entrance to downtown more inviting, the ideas are compelling.

Likewise in Springdale, the city's planned public investment in creating a park setting downtown is designed to be a spark for a better future of Emma Avenue and other parts of downtown. Aided with a \$2 million grant from the Walton Family Foundation, the city will be able to uncap Spring Creek and create a venue that's a magnet for visitors/shoppers. Give people a reason to come downtown, the theory goes, and businesses will eventually follow.

Of course, to a much grander scale, that's exactly what's happened to Bentonville's downtown. The opening of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art has sparked a new level of interest in downtown, making it the place to be for residents, visitors and many new ventures.

All of the efforts in these cities are inspiring new interest in downtown areas, and that's going to be key to the future. Government plans come and go. Many of them end up as three-ring binders collecting dust on a shelf. City government cannot simply wave a wand and make revitalization happen. But it can create an environment in which private investment is more likely to come.

The future of this serious planning will rely a great deal on how much stakeholders buy into fresh ideas and trying new things. It's difficult to change the economic and cultural fortunes of a part of any town that's struggling, but it's entirely possible, and the effort is vital to the goal of keeping cities -- entire cities -- strong. A city with a downtrodden core cannot realize its true potential anywhere.

We're glad to see the evidence of private and public investment working together to cure some of the ills that have developed over time. It appears brighter days are ahead for these great Northwest Arkansas communities if the hard work continues.