



Downtown Gig Harbor Business Strategy

December 1, 2008

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Prepared for the City of Gig Harbor

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Introduction

The City of Gig Harbor engaged Spinnaker Strategies to prepare a strategy to strengthen business downtown and generate more sales. The focus of this strategy is the area around Harborview and Pioneer Way that includes the shopping center and Judson Street. There are other commercial areas around the harbor, including Millville, Finnholm and Donkey Creek, but this strategy focuses on the traditional commercial and emotional center of the city.

All places compete for people's time, money, attention and loyalty. Downtown faces increasing competition from new stores and malls on the west side of the city and in Gig Harbor North, and it will lose in head-to-head competition with these areas if it tries to sell itself simply as another specialty retail center. Downtown needs to compete based on its own distinctive strengths.

This document lays out a competitive strategy based on a positioning statement and five key principles intended to guide future planning and marketing. The last sections include recommendations for specific actions that Gig Harbor can take.

The ad hoc advisory committee played an invaluable role in preparing this strategy, meeting bi-weekly in June, July and August, and giving up a full Saturday to tour other waterfront retail areas around Puget Sound. With such a great place to start from, and a committed citizenry like this, downtown Gig Harbor will not only survive but thrive, as a strong center of both community pride and prosperity.





Overall Positioning

This strategy positions downtown as the “un-mall”, as an authentic, walkable village or town center where people can live, work, walk, play, shop and worship all in the same place. The principles on the following pages detail this positioning: 1) that downtown is a gathering place, 2) that people can walk to coffee from where they live or work, 3) that the downtown retains the old buildings and character that give it authenticity and charm, 4) that there are places to stroll and relax, and 5) that there are public spaces owned, controlled and actively used by the public.

Compare this to a shopping center, built all at one time, surrounded by a sea of parking, under the control of one owner, and set apart from neighboring residential areas. The essence of the downtown strategy is variety- of different kinds of people coming together for different activities, all in one place with a strong sense of community.





PRINCIPLE 1: THE GATHERING PLACE

In a world of malls and chain stores, people want authenticity, the real thing. They also crave the personal -- for the barista or salesperson to know them when they walk in, and to see friends and acquaintances. People also want to be able to linger without feeling like they have to buy a cup of coffee to sit down.

While downtown can be the “living room” of the city where people spend time together, they also need reasons to go there regularly, “anchor uses”. On the private side, these anchor uses could include a constellation of restaurants, including higher-end establishments, brew pubs and more coffee houses. They might also include another downtown bookstore or a magazine store that provides a place to read and drink coffee. And the list should certainly include a small inn or boutique hotel that caters to business travelers as well as to tourists.

On the public side, these anchors could include a library branch, reading room or homework center in the Bogue Building; a community hall that would be both a senior center and a place to take classes; and a public boathouse for youth sports and masters-level rowing and paddling. Downtown will need features that draw not only seniors and empty nesters but teens, ‘tweens and families with children. If successful, this mix of people will become an attraction in itself.





PRINCIPLE 2: WALK TO COFFEE

More than just higher gas prices are getting people out of their cars. More and more people want to live and work in the same place, and go about on foot. The promise of being able to walk to coffee is a strong one, both in getting people to move closer to downtown, and in creating repeat customers.

As part of its downtown strategy, the City needs to reinforce the walkable and historic character of the surrounding neighborhoods, which now provide downtown's most loyal customers. For example, the City should plan that the vacant and underdeveloped lots in the Millville and Finnholm neighborhoods be built out with bungalows, cottages and other small scale housing that will be in character with what is already there. Similar planning should go on for the vacant tracts which separate the shopping center from Stanich Avenue and Tarabochia Street from Chinook Avenue. These plans should also include more formal pedestrian links.

The City should also encourage in-fill development with small offices that appeal to professionals. This will bring more people downtown during the day and boost the lunch trade so vital to restaurants. Beyond this, it simply makes good sense for the city as a whole to provide more opportunities to work near the water, for this space will attract highly skilled people who could live or work anywhere but choose Gig Harbor as their city. These professionals, "knowledge workers", are the stuff of the modern economy, and they will create jobs that save people from commuting to Tacoma.





PRINCIPLE 3: REWARD RENOVATION

Gig Harbor does not have to sacrifice its sense of place to have a strong downtown. By rewarding renovation, and discouraging wholesale demolition and redevelopment, the City can preserve the downtown's historic and traditional qualities. Cannon Beach, on the Oregon Coast, is but one example of a downtown where sensitive infill has actually made the place more interesting than it was 40 years ago.

Rewarding renovation will require changing both the planning and the building codes. The planning code needs to more precisely define the desired building scale, materials, placement and features, and to provide incentives for people to renovate rather than replace. These incentives might include expedited approvals or more favorable parking requirements.

The building codes should match the upgrade requirements to the scale of the project. Otherwise owners may simply choose to tear the building down and start over. The State of New Jersey has created new building codes designed to reward renovation, and these codes have sparked a wholesale increase in renovation activity and values. These codes require that building owners comply with life safety requirements in their current use of the structures, and not just when they need permits. This approach leads to steadier investment over time.



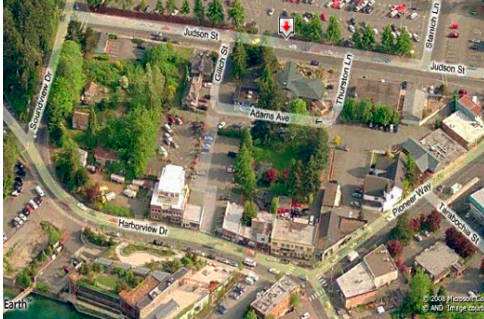


PRINCIPLE 4: MAKE GILICH A LANE

Downtown needs a new “Velcro” point for retail, a place to sit and stroll. Gilich Lane, just off of Judson Street, can be that place, particularly if it becomes the center piece of the surrounding block.

Ringed by Judson, Pioneer and Harborview Way, this block is one of the most interesting places in the city, although few people now venture beyond the perimeter. It is, in fact, a rare place where a person can live, work, shop, eat and worship all in the same block, and it has an eclectic mix of buildings and a semi-rural quiet that reflects the overall character of Gig Harbor.

Extending Gilich from Judson Street through to Harborview will link the shopping center to the waterfront and create a lovely retail lane and raise the value of interior parcels. The City might also consider creating a small public green in this area, which would be another magnet for activity. There is much to be gained, both publicly and among private property owners, from approaching the future development of this area together. The overall approach should be that of creating and revealing a special place, a place that provides a place to go, to explore, to relax, to enjoy the qualities of community that define both a village and a city.





PRINCIPLE 5: LEVERAGE THE PUBLIC PLACES

Downtown includes not only private property and businesses but also public parks, historic buildings, and the sidewalks and streets which connect them. The way the City uses and manages these assets will have just as much effect on downtown's health as the opening of a new coffee house or hotel.

The greatest opportunity for better use of public space is at the base of Pioneer Way, where the City should widen the sidewalk and improve the small public plaza at the southwest corner. This has the potential to become the true focal point of downtown, but it needs upgrading. It is this intersection where most tourists mentally start their visit, and it could a picture-postcard image for marketing the city as a whole. The City also needs to limit the amount of commute traffic that goes past this intersection, since rush-hour noise levels can make conversation almost impossible.

The City should view the parks and museums and historic waterfront structures as part of a recreation program that gets people to come downtown. This means ensuring that the Eddon Boatyard, the Harbor History Museum and even the buildings in Skansie Park are programmed in such a way that they draw regular and frequent use by residents, and not just occasional visits. At Skansie Park, the City should aim for active year-round use, particularly by families and children. Adding playground equipment, climbing walls or fountains may do this, but these improvements should not be aimed solely at the very young, for people of all ages will use these if they are carefully chosen and placed. The City also needs to maximize use of the public docks, where increasing the number of visiting boats will increase the number of land visitors who come down to see them.



Next Steps

While this strategy defines a positioning and identity statement that is the “what” of marketing, this is just the beginning. The “how” and “who” of carrying out this strategy will be equally important, and the City needs to play an active and on-going role in this. The long-term success of this strategy will depend on creating political support for it, in building a management team, and in recruiting business. As next steps, the City should:

1 Consolidate and review the various harbor area plans and strategies. This includes this business strategy, plans for Skansie Park, and streetscape plans for Judson Street and Harborview Drive. The recommendations from these efforts should be turned into a single prioritized list of actions for the area. In bringing these plans together, the City may find that it needs to change some of the individual strategies.

2 Start talking with landowners on a regular basis. The current recession gives the City a chance to start a dialogue with property owners that will lead to more of a shared vision for what the area can become, before individual owners and developers bring forth new plans in the next building boom. These conversations cost almost nothing to carry out, and they should be led by the mayor or the city manager. The conversations should include both major property owners, such as the Russell Foundation, and small merchants.

3 Create a single citizens’ planning organization for the harbor area. There are many economic development opportunities that the City can realize in the harbor area, if it plans ahead. Doing so will require bringing together residents, merchants, office firms, marine industries, non-profits, and park users, and this group will need time to organize and become strong. The city should start organizing this group now.

4 Look for money. The City is already spending money on various programs in the area, including promotion paid for with the lodging tax. The City should count up these expenditures, confirm its priorities, and research whether some of this money can be redirected to bricks-and-mortar projects.

5 Spend money on small, tangible improvements. These projects could include sidewalk improvements at the southwest corner of Harborview Drive and Pioneer Way, the removal of sidewalk landscaping that now impedes access to Skansie Brothers Park, and other improvements that people who walk or use the area daily will enjoy. This will get people talking about what other improvements they value, and involve the public in a kind of incremental planning approach that may be far more effective than bigger design efforts.

6 Create a target list of businesses. Downtown is a venture, and every venture has partners. The City should target the types of businesses that it wants, and assemble the marketing and other tools it needs to attract them. Gig Harbor has terrific potential to become a center in the knowledge economy, and it should take steps now to begin attracting both companies in these sectors, and to build the business infrastructure needed to support these companies.



Appendix

TACTICAL ACTIONS

The following is a list of possible actions and projects:

Streets and Sidewalks

1. Create a small pedestrian plaza where Pioneer Way meets Harborview Drive.
2. Redirect some commuter traffic from Harborview Drive, to Stinson Avenue.
3. Extend Gilich Lane between Judson Street and Harborview Drive, creating a formal foot path or car lane.
4. Create formal pedestrian links behind the shopping center between Stanich Lane and Stanich Avenue, north of Pioneer Way between Tarabochia Street and Chinook Avenue, and between Novak and Rosedale Streets in Millville

Parks and Docks

1. Free up transient moorage by ticketing those who exceed stay limits. Add temporary docks for summer time transient use.
2. Create a municipal boathouse.
3. Add fountains, climbing walls, play structures and other child-attracting features to Skansie Park.
4. Program the museum, boatyards and Skansie net shed with weekly classes and workshops.
5. Create a combination senior center and multi-purpose building on the Key Bank site at Judson and Pioneer Way.
6. Move canoe and kayak rentals to the Skansie Park docks.

Building Codes and Planning Efforts

1. Relax parking standards for restaurants.
2. Adopt the IBC renovation code.
3. Create expedited review for projects that meet city standards for building scale, mass, setbacks and materials.
4. Allow small lot residential development with bungalows, cottages and clustered housing.
5. Create a master plan for the block bounded by Harborview, Judson and Pioneer.
6. Allow for professional and office uses in designated areas near downtown and the waterfront.
7. Create special planning and building codes for reuse of the net sheds and other historic structures near the water.
8. Revise codes to encourage creative interim uses on sites like the Stutz property.
9. Focus future retail development in Finnholm and Donkey Creek in smaller areas, and target redevelopment of sites like the parking lot next to the Finnholm Market.

Marketing and Outreach

1. Create a target list of businesses for recruitment. The list for downtown should include a white-table cloth restaurant that serves lunch, brew pubs with live music, a small inn or hotel with a rating of at least three stars, a coffee house, a combination magazine store and coffee house, and sit-down family restaurants.
2. Explore ways of using the lodging tax on capital projects.
3. Target part of the tourism marketing at local residents, identifying specific activities around the harbor.

RESOURCES AND LINKS

Great Small Cities with Great Downtowns:

Oregon:

Ashland, Bend, Cannon Beach, Hood River

Washington:

Bainbridge Island, Fairhaven (Bellingham), Friday Harbor, Kirkland, Port Townsend, Roslyn

California:

Claremont, Los Gatos, Mill Valley, Palo Alto, San Juan Capistrano

Public Anchors:

Oregon:

Multnomah Arts Center, Portland OR:
<http://www.multnomahartscenter.org/>

Portland Warehouse:
<http://www.portlandboathouse.org/>

British Columbia

Roundhouse Community Center, Vancouver, BC:
<http://www.roundhouse.ca/>

Garden City Park playground, Richmond, BC:
http://www.space2place.com/public_garden-city.html

Renovation Codes

New Jersey:

New Jersey has been the national leader in this area since 1996. Its a code is even considered better than the International Building Code's special provisions for renovation.

New Jersey building code:
<http://www.state.nj.us/dca/codes/rehab/rehabguide.shtml>,
or call Amy Frank, 609-292-7899.

IBC Adoption:
<http://www.iccsafe.org/government/adoption.html>



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