Assessing Downtown Canton

Introduction

This assessment is an outcome of a multiyear initiative between Illinois Main Street, Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) and University of Illinois Extension. Canton, a Main Street community, was selected as a pilot case for this multiyear initiative.

The aim of this partnership is to enhance community engagement in academics for reciprocal learning. To achieve this, a summer workshop course, 'Developing Resilient Downtowns', was designed by Prof. Stacy Harwood, Associate Professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, UIUC, to engage students in the Downtown Canton assessment process. The reciprocal learning enables a hands on practical knowledge for students through engaging with the community, and the community gets cutting edge analysis and a unique perspective about local issues and recommendations from the students.

The University of Illinois Extension served as a bridge connecting the Department of Urban and Regional Planning to local partners facilitating learning and meaningful engagement. The University of Illinois Extension helped to establish connections with local leaders and community members from Canton, and two other nearby Main Street communities (Lincoln and Pekin) to learn from their planning efforts.

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Faculty Advisor
Dr. Stacy Harwood
217.265.0874
sharwood@illinois.edu

Economic Development Educator
Kathleen Brown
309.255.9189
brownlk@illinois.edu

Research Assistant
Manish Singh
217.819.2241
msingh12@illinois.edu
Assessment Approach

The assessment has three parts. The first part analyses the issues and challenges Canton faces by looking into some key demographics. The second part conducts a downtown market analysis to gauge the possibilities of revitalization based on a retail focus. Manish Singh, a graduate student from the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, was hired to conduct the Downtown Canton market analysis. The third part of this study explores the possibilities of revitalizing Downtown Canton by looking at factors that influence the retail market. The Downtown Canton market analysis starts by delineating the geographical trade area that the downtown has the potential to cover. It looks into the demographics of the trade area to understand the existing resident market, especially their choices and spending behavior. Along with the lifestyle characteristics and spending potential, it strives to understand the retail gap on a larger scale. The analysis calculates the retail demand and supply for the whole trade area to identify the retail leakage from the region.

On a different scale from trade area gap analysis, it compares the Downtown Canton business mix to cities with similar demographic characteristics to understand the competitive standing of Canton and opportunities for new businesses in downtown. We draw from our field visits to downtowns of Lincoln, IL and Pekin, IL to compare Downtown Canton. Along with these quantitative methods, it also uses a qualitative approach to complement the information. It draws from a comprehensive consumer survey to trace the shopping behaviors and choices of potential consumers. The analysis presents the findings from business owner interviews to understand their perspectives about the market.

We introduce the concept of resiliency for downtowns and prospects of current trends that favor the promotion of resiliency in small towns. This framework has been developed by Michael Burayidi in his book, *Resilient Downtowns: A New Approach to Revitalizing Small-and Medium City Downtowns*.

Summary of Findings

Canton, like so many rustbelt communities, struggles due to population decline and an aging population. There are limited opportunities to further recruit retail in Downtown Canton as the existing market is close to saturation given the population in the trade area. To create more retail, Canton needs more local and nonlocal consumers to support existing and future commercial development in downtown. Consequently, it is imperative for Canton to think beyond the possibilities of retail based downtown economic development.

Canton’s trade area covers more than 28,000 residents from small towns and villages surrounding Canton. These surrounding communities have relatively less retail activity and largely depend on Canton for convenience and destination shopping. The strong retail gravitational potential of Downtown Canton is also reflected by the fact that Downtown Canton has more retail businesses in comparison to the average of its peer cities and state average. Downtown Canton thus becomes the center of retail in the trade area as many visitors are also visiting Canton for different downtown events and nearby recreational opportunities identified in the consumer survey. Business owner interviews elicited that the downtown business climate is improving along with better involvement and collaboration in downtown events.
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The existing retail meets much of the consumer demand in the trade area. This was reflected in the trade area retail gap analysis which shows a low leakage/surplus factor for both retail trade and food and drink places. There are certain business subcategories where trade area has a significant leakage. Along with this, the consumer survey also identifies several opportunities for expansion in retail, restaurants and businesses.

Population forecasts suggest continued decline for Canton and the region. This means limited spending potential of Canton’s trade area households in comparison to the national average. The existing business mix in the trade area is almost enough to support the existing consumer base, thus offering limited opportunity for further business expansion and recruitment. Canton needs new strategies focusing on attracting population, whether local or tourists, to support current and future retail businesses.

Retail Development

Retail businesses are still concentrated within the 0.5 mile radius of Downtown Canton. Canton needs to continue practicing business expansion and recruitment along with trying additional strategies to enlarge the downtown consumer base.

Downtown Living

Downtown Canton already has more than 3,000 residents. Before focusing on the second story development in downtown, Canton should prioritize surrounding neighborhoods because downtown is losing population in surrounding neighborhoods.

Immigration and Diversity

There is a very small but growing immigrant population in Canton. Creating an immigrant friendly business district will require getting immigrant entrepreneurs to engage and participate in downtown activities.

Civic and Cultural Amenities

Downtown Canton has many civic and cultural amenities; it needs to expand them to include more diverse populations, such as different age groups, family types and interest groups. Specifically, Canton could renovate the existing movie theater to make downtown a destination.

Heritage, Cultural and Recreational Tourism

Canton has several historically significant sites, nearby recreational opportunities, and hosts many downtown events. It needs to link local attractions and regional tourism initiatives to expand the non-local consumer base.

Downtown Design

Downtown Canton is attractive, walkable and safe. It can be further improved by enhancing crosswalks and adding more street furniture, landscaping, bike lanes, bike racks and ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) accessible elements.

Leadership and Partnerships

Canton has existing partnerships with local and regional organizations, and has engaged and committed leaders who want a revived downtown. However, it is vital to create further partnerships with other people such as local entrepreneurs as well as try to engage young residents and leaders from diverse populations.