

Downtown Idea Exchange

Amenities

Trees are worth downtown's investment

The fact that “money doesn't grow on trees” does not mean downtowns should not invest in their trees. Actually, research indicates that what's good for the air and aesthetic environment of downtown is also good for the perception of downtown by its users. And positive outlooks tend to be accompanied by positive cash flows.

A series of studies by Kathleen Wolf, research social scientist, College of Forest Resources, University of Washington, has investigated associations between the urban forest and people's response to downtown retail settings. These studies show that providing for trees in the streetscape is a productive investment for a downtown.

People enjoy having trees in streetscapes

Wolf has studied public preferences for streetscapes considering urban forestry, or the presence of trees, in the central business districts of small, medium, and large towns and cities in the U.S. Downtowns where studies were conducted include examples from seasonal states such as Georgia, Idaho, Nebraska, Oregon, and Washington.

Each research project first evaluated public preferences regarding trees in downtown streetscapes. “Then we did some perceptual evaluations as well: What sort of associations did people have with streets that did or did not have street trees?” Wolf says.

“What we found, overwhelmingly and consistently, was that people prefer having trees in streetscapes,” she says. “The higher preference ratings were associated with larger trees — having a full canopy that creates a ‘sense of place’ or ‘rooms’ within the business district. We also found that orderly streetscapes —

those that were tended and well cared for — got higher ratings.”

Interestingly, there was very little difference in responses based on people's traits. “Age, gender, socioeconomic status, the different city sizes — [there was] very little difference across those traits as far as what people were telling us they preferred,” Wolf says.

Inferences extend to products, services

“A very interesting follow-up, if we're able to find funding, would be to observe people's behavior and their purchasing patterns without them necessarily knowing what is going on, to verify this work,” Wolf says. But that said, people consistently told researchers that they would draw inferences about downtown from the tree situation.

Interviewed subjects would make judgments about a downtown area that went beyond its vegetation, landscape, or streetscape. “They were telling us that they judge the products in forested streetscape places to be of better quality,” Wolf says.

“They judged that the merchants would be more helpful, and more informative. They judged that the care of the business district was better — even though we were very careful in selecting images to present to people that all of them were tidy and well-cared for,” she says. Still, people were found to judge images of tree-lined downtown streets to represent better-tended downtowns.

Trees give root to rootedness in downtown

The consistency of results across multiple studies suggests how innately trees shape human perception of places. For small downtowns, investing in urban forestry

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alone will not offset the competitive challenges posed by big stores on the edge of town or online vendors. However, “it does seem that trees are important in creating that ‘sense of place’ that is so important to [downtown] retail,” Wolf says.

“Where at one time, economists viewed shopping as a very utilitarian activity — you had needs or wants, you would go shop, purchase those items, done deal — now people are looking for places to shop, browsing experiences, something they can share with friends and family. It’s a recreational activity as well as an activity with purpose. And it seems that the investment in trees conveys that a district recognizes that, and is making it a place that is more comfortable and perhaps more memorable for shoppers.”

People say they’ll pay a premium for trees

As with most other forms of downtown improvements, marked improvements in the perception of downtown users don’t come through the actions of an individual business owner, but rather an entire district.

The most compelling rationale for incorporating trees into a downtown improvement program, from the various studies: “People told us that they’re willing to spend a little more in these districts that have a quality urban forest,” Wolf says. How much more people said they are willing to spend downtown ranged from about a nine-percent premium in small towns to about 12 percent in larger downtowns.

“Merchants then gain additional revenue perhaps, and some of that can be re-invested into this forest

resource,” Wolf says. “The emphasis is, we’re looking at this as a district-wide investment rather than individual merchant’s. And consequently, the return is district-wide.”

Who’s accountable?

So there is incentive for downtowns to plant and maintain trees as part of its streetscape. But who’s responsibility should this be?

The answer varies from town to town. In some downtowns, the property owners are required to maintain and manage the trees on the public sidewalks adjoining their properties. Elsewhere, the municipality will assume management of downtown tree maintenance. Downtowns should identify and communicate the obligations of various players so that misunderstandings don’t result in neglected trees.

Contact: Kathleen Wolf, College of Forest Resources, University of Washington, kwolf@u.washington.edu. To view Wolf’s research on people’s perceptions as impacted by urban greening, visit www.cfr.washington.edu/research.envmind. ♦

Downtown’s nature needs nurture

Researchers from the University of Washington’s College of Forest Resources found that downtowns with small trees were appreciated more than downtowns without any vegetation at all, but not as much as downtowns with large canopy trees.

“It’s easy to pull together people to do a tree planting downtown, either by volunteers or by contracting the work,” says Kathleen Wolf, research social scientist. “But what is very important to achieve the greatest level of benefit [of having trees line downtown streets] is ongoing management.”

If downtown chooses to invest in trees, it’s essential to include and think about long-term management as a part of that downtown improvement program element. People generally don’t pay attention to urban nature, Wolf says, “and yet in its absence, that’s when we start to feel the [adverse] effects.”