

Reviewing Portland's 2009 Retail Strategy

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In October 2008, Mayor Sam Adams formed a group that would soon be named the Downtown Vision Task Force. The group's primary objective: define a signature retail concept for the Downtown, Portland Retail Core. The Downtown Retail Core is the area defined by SW Washington & Salmon Streets on the North and South ends, and 3rd & 12th Avenues on the East and West ends. The Mayor directed the Task Force to focus initial efforts on "signature streets," or streets that are further defined as those that create a retail anchor for the city that will draw the most visitors and residents of the area Downtown.

The Downtown Vision Task Force decided to divide up into two subcommittees; the Physical Realm Subcommittee, and the Implementation Subcommittee. Each group is comprised of 13-14 advisors plus a supporting staff. The types of advisors the Mayor asked to be a part of his Task Force were Portland professionals with a background as: Developers, Commercial Brokers, Marketing Specialists, Architects, Retail Spokespersons, Portland Tourism Advocates, Attorneys, and folks from the Portland Business Alliance and Portland Development Commission. The end result of these committees was the Portland Downtown Retail Strategy for 2009.

The Portland Downtown Retail Strategy for 2009 focused on creating a vibrant Downtown that would be the cornerstone of a healthy regional economy. They saw Downtown as "the face" of Portland, the area of Portland that would attract the most people. They wanted locals and visitors alike to know where in town was the place to shop, eat, and see, much like Pike's Place in Seattle, or Times Square in New York City. According to the 2009 Retail Strategy, Portland "is only one twelfth of one percent of the region's geography. The central city is home to 13% of the regional employment base, generates 15% of the City's property tax revenues, and 4% of the region's low income housing stock."

The subcommittees called for four major steps to take place that would redefine Downtown and present Portland with a healthier and more recognizable retail corridor:

1. Designate Morrison and Yamhill as the "Signature Streets" within the Retail Core.
2. Establish a Retail Overlay District.
3. Create a Unified Identity and Effective Marketing Strategy for the District.
4. Employ a set of Tactical tools to implement the Retail Spine.

By designating Morrison and Yamhill as the Signature Streets, the subcommittees were making these streets the main focus for the project. Both streets would now act as the organizational "spine" for the Retail district. The reason Morrison and Yamhill were chosen was due to several factors, the two most important being that many Portlanders already come to this district due to such landmarks at Pioneer Courthouse and Pioneer Square and Portland's most recognizable and best performing high-end Retailers are already located here.

The Retail Overlay District will have direct investment throughout the district, but will concentrate resources on these signature streets. Some of the action items this district will cover are calling for more visual cues in the built environment to let people know they are in the main shopping corridor, along with investment to strengthen the continuity between retail storefronts. One of the problems we are seeing now are the "dead zones," or those areas where there isn't any storefront at all but wasted, non-engaging space along the sidewalk. These dead zones contribute to a lack in shopping as once a shopper reaches this dead zone, they are more likely to turn around and go back the way they came than continue down the street. A good

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example of this would be on SW 4th and Morrison, across from Pioneer Place mall, where the former Shoe Pavilion store was in the Kress/Caplan Building. Where once was an active storefront, now sits a large, dark vacant space. Another goal of the Retail Overlay District is to address these currently vacant spaces and to provide more engaging storefronts, even if no retailer currently inhabits said spaces.

Branding and consistent marketing efforts are the main focus of action item three; creating a unified identity and effective marketing strategy for the district. These marketing and branding efforts are to improve the perception of Downtown, Portland. The visual cues of these efforts are going to be used to define the district. Part of these are projected to be done by improving pedestrian and shopper access to storefronts and having routine and continuous cleaning of both sidewalks and city-owned parking garages. Also standardizing signature signage as well as lighting, trash receptacles, planters, and benches along the signature streets is a key focus. Travel Portland, a group that strives to provide information about events and all things Portland to visitors and residents alike, would be put in the lead as one of the groups charged with the leverage and marketing resources for the Downtown Marketing initiative. Lastly, the implementation of a marketing strategy for downtown would go into planning and effect. This would be focused on promoting "positive messages" about the Downtown area, and would be broadcasted and promoted through such media as television, outdoor billboards, print media, and public relations efforts.

By employing a set of tactical tools to implement the Retail Spine, the subcommittees are working on "managing, regulating and giving financial incentives and technical insurance in areas that will ensure the success of (the) downtown retail district and the signature streets." This would allow the subcommittees to designate special zoning for areas where incentives could be given for the promotion of retail space and improved storefront efforts. They would also consider allotting special funds to property owners for the improvements of their buildings. The focus on these new designated areas would be for the possible height and floor plate expansions as well as new development in those areas. Overall the efforts of this action item would be to coordinate all programs and leadership of the downtown area to manage entities and reduce overlap, thereby maximizing efficiency and streamlining any and all operations. Furthermore this would create retail compact, or understanding of which types of retailers contribute to the signature concept and what help is available to those storefronts and owners that qualify for this category.

Now that September of 2009 is halfway over and 2010 is on the horizon, we can see that many of the action items outlined in the Portland Retail Strategy for 2009 have come to fruition. The Trimet's Green Line opened last week in Portland and was greeted by the locals with open arms. The addition of many new art pieces along the signature streets, in addition to re-bricking efforts to improve SW Morrison and Yamhill have not gone un-noticed. Skinnidip Yogurt will be moving into the former Swatch space on Pioneer Square come the end of the 4th Quarter this year, further adding to an already impressive store line-up on Portland's most sought after retail corner. Also, Elephants Delicatessen has already opened a new satellite concept on SW 5th Ave., improving the once very noticeable dead zone located on the East Side of Macy's. With the addition of new retailers and improvements to the signature streets comes more business for local downtown stores as a whole. More business means more shoppers. More shoppers mean higher safety. Higher safety means a more positive outlook on Portland, which in the end attracts more retailers and stores to relocate here.

Mayor Sam Adams plan for subcommittees to create the Portland Downtown Retail Strategy of 2009 was a good move. Hopefully he will continue to see it through to the end, especially during these times when as everyone knows, business needs it the most.

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