

# **DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES IN ILLINOIS: ASSESSING THE PRIORITIES OF MUNICIPAL LEADERS IN ILLINOIS**

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*This article evaluates local economic development practices used to improve downtown districts in Illinois. Using the results of a survey of Illinois mayors, it offers insights into some of the strategies currently employed, describes how they are managed and financed, and provides examples of the efforts underway by several municipalities. The article also ranks the types of assistance needed most by communities seeking to infuse greater vitality into their central business districts.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Recent news media discussions about downsizing and closures of large retail chains have focused major attention on the changing future of retail activities and the impact on downtowns in many communities. Downtowns have played major roles in municipalities in the past and will continue to do so in the future, but their roles are changing with new opportunities for local economic growth and development for communities willing and able to take advantage of them. The challenges are to find those opportunities and reposition the downtown area to reach its potential.

Downtowns traditionally have been shopping and employment centers in many, if not most, places. They generate sales taxes, which serve as major revenue sources for many municipalities; they also provide a significant property tax base. Especially important is that downtown areas are often a social hub in the community with both residents and visitors judging local economic health partly by their condition. Thus, a vibrant and sustainable downtown area contributes to the quality of life in the community which, in turn, helps to attract and retain residents.

However, the roles of downtowns in many municipalities are changing as people shop and interact in different ways. The Internet has dramatically affected shopping patterns in many areas, leading to the downsizing of both stores and malls. Two growing age cohorts – elderly residents and young adults – spend in different ways, directly affecting downtown activities. Older residents

spend relatively more on health and less on clothes and entertainment than Millennials, who often are more interested in travel, health and recreation, entertainment activities and other experiences that they associate with a high quality of life. These trends mean that downtown managers and local officials must identify new ways to market what their municipality has to offer.

At the same time, both age cohorts have expressed a preference for living in a safe and attractive setting with relatively easy access to basic needs and entertainment in a walkable environment (Community and Transportation Preference Survey, 2015). Downtowns can be modified to meet these preferences, but such changes require serious introspection and local creativity.

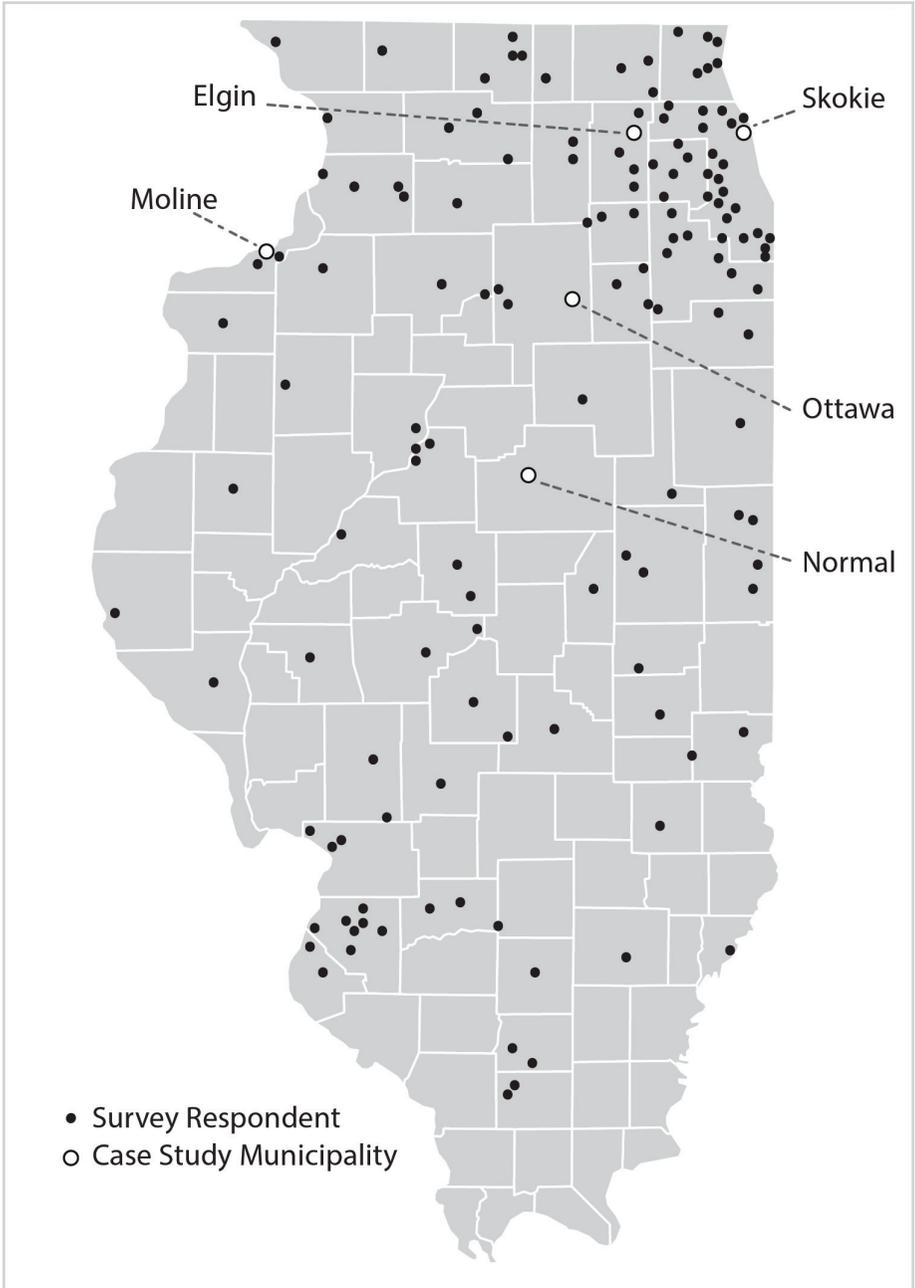
Buildings that previously housed large commercial or industrial enterprises have been converted to different uses to increase traffic in the downtown area and support other downtown businesses. In some cases, these buildings are now home to specialty shops, restaurants and entertainment that attract in-coming residents or tourists. Still other communities have focused on expanding health and recreation opportunities in the downtown area, but also with links to neighboring recreation sites such as a river or trail system.

The result is that municipalities face two main alternatives: Some may allow downtown facilities to remain empty with further deterioration and decay, while other local leaders may explore options for dealing with business closings, identifying new markets and aggressively promoting local attractions. In these cases, municipalities are creating new assets and opportunities that appeal to growing market segments, make the area attractive to tourists and enhance quality of life. These communities see the downtown area as a catalyst for local economic development and act to make it better suited for expected population and economic changes.

This article describes the findings of a survey of Illinois mayors, conducted jointly by the Northern Illinois University (NIU) Center for Governmental Studies (CGS) and the Illinois Municipal League (IML), regarding the importance of downtowns in local economic development practices, how these issues are managed with strategies employed and what financial approaches are used. Statewide, 148 municipalities across Illinois completed the CGS-IML survey, with many providing information about actions underway and examples of advances in downtown revitalization projects (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> They also provided examples of strategies used to address downtown enhancement issues and the types of assistance needed in the future to successfully implement them.

**FIGURE 1**

Communities Responding to Downtown Strategy Survey



## **CHANGING CONDITIONS AND ROLES OF DOWNTOWNS**

Downtowns are strongly linked to overall economic conditions in a city because incomes earned are usually spent in local businesses. The fact that residents now travel longer distances to work – often in larger regional centers – means that downtowns (especially in smaller municipalities) face increasing competition. In mid-size municipalities, some downtown retailers have been lured to shopping centers by agglomeration economies, additional merchandising space and more parking. In the process, they leave smaller former retail sites in the downtown to other uses. The vacated stores can pose local issues but also often represent opportunities for new and different types of ventures that can add life to downtown areas (Evans and Walzer, 2014; Milder, 2017).

According to mayors responding to the CGS-IML survey, downtown areas in many, if not most, Illinois municipalities have experienced the trends described above. Other municipalities have remained vibrant, even during transitions that caused vacancies. The condition of their downtowns fit into several categories from healthy to serious deterioration, depending on size and location of municipalities. In response, municipal leaders reported taking actions in varying degrees to address these situations.

The largest number (88) of respondents (64.7%) reported a traditional downtown around which the city had developed. Along these lines, 59 mayors (43.4%) reported that the streetscape and public space had been significantly improved, suggesting continued investment in downtown areas. Other mayors (54) reported a stable downtown area with 10% or fewer vacancies in commercial buildings. Nearly one-third (29.4%) said that new space was currently available or was under development for commercial uses, and a much smaller group (14.0%) reported a growing central business district with demand for additional space.

At the other extreme, 33.8% reported a more than 10% vacancy rate in commercial buildings, with 23.5% saying that retail functions in the downtown are nearly gone or that many retail buildings had been converted to other uses (24.6%). Nearly one-third reported one or more significant “white elephant” buildings with no obvious interest or prospective buyers.

These findings show the differences in downtown status and conditions in Illinois municipalities, as well as opportunities for new efforts in renewal or enhancement to meet the change in population and demographic needs and

tastes. Later discussions in this article provide examples of strategies underway to adjust to these changing needs.

Healthy and vibrant downtowns are important to local economic development in many ways (Table 1). The largest number (125) of mayors rated the ability of downtowns to create a sense of community and positive image as “very important.” Second highest (105) was the downtown’s role in attracting new business and retaining other potential businesses (101). Respondents also stressed the importance of downtowns in attracting visitors (98) as well as attracting or retaining residents and employees (93).

**TABLE 1**  
Communities Responding to Downtown Strategy Survey

ACTIVITY	LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE				TOTAL RESPONSES	WEIGHTED AVE.
	NOT	SOME-WHAT	VERY			
Attracting new businesses	0.75% 1	20.90% 28	78.36% 105		134	3.56
Attracting and retaining other potential employers	3.03% 4	24.24% 32	72.73% 96		132	3.42
Attracting new and retaining residents	4.48% 6	26.12% 35	69.40% 93		134	3.34
Attracting visitors	3.68% 5	24.26% 33	72.06% 98		136	3.40
Retaining current businesses	1.49% 2	23.13% 31	75.37% 101		134	3.49
Attracting and retaining employees	5.30% 7	38.64% 51	56.06% 74		132	3.07
Creating a sense of community and positive image	—	8.09% 11	91.91% 125		136	3.84

By and large, most respondents (102) reported that downtown is included in the overall economic development strategy with a variety of local enhancement actions. Most-often reported (94) is an action plan for downtown improvements that includes financial incentives to attract businesses (93). Specific activities mentioned include a façade improvement program (81) and a schedule of regular events to promote downtown businesses. Forty-one respondents reported a separate budget set aside for downtown promotion, while a similar number reported a downtown promotion budget in the general fund. No detailed information on exactly how these funds are spent or the outcomes was provided in the survey.

## **OBSTACLES TO DEVELOPMENT**

While conditions and prospects for downtowns are somewhat optimistic, major hurdles must be overcome, according to survey respondents. The most significant obstacles, which respondents ranked *important* or *very important* the most frequently, include residents shopping over the Internet (100), slow population growth or declines in the municipality or region (85), closings of important stores (83), declines in employment with residents relocating to other areas (78), expansions of retail and discount centers in other regions (38) and retiring business owners with no heirs interested in continuing the business (75).

These issues reflect the difficulties associated with accommodating past trends resulting from major demographic changes, shifts in purchasing patterns, and changes in marketing practices allowed by technology advances. These issues will continue in the future, so local officials and community leaders must explore ways to address them using new approaches such as incorporating more local food vendors, promoting other uses such as arts and crafts or entertainment opportunities that are described in the Implementation section.

## **MANAGING AND FINANCING DOWNTOWN STRATEGIES**

According to the survey findings, downtown promotion and enhancement programs are managed and financed differently depending on the size of municipality, local opportunities and institutions.

### **MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE**

By far, the most frequently reported agencies with at least *some responsibility* for managing downtown strategies were chambers of commerce (69), followed

by municipal staff dedicated to downtown activities (58). Thirty-nine mayors reported a local nonprofit organization dedicated to downtown (34), or the use of private consultants (31).

In a related question asking which agencies had *main* responsibility, however, a municipal staff person dedicated to downtown issues was the most common response (45). Other responses identified groups such as Main Street organizations (13), chambers of commerce (10), other nonprofit organizations (12), downtown development organizations (9) and private contractors or consultants (15). The responses differed by size because larger municipalities usually have larger and more complex downtown areas and typically have more resources including specialized management expertise. Organizations dedicated to downtown promotion can provide more services for these activities and a stronger marketing program.

**TABLE 2**

Municipal Management of Downtown Strategy

<b>AGENCY DEEMED PRIMARILY RESPONSIBLE FOR MANAGING DOWNTOWN STRATEGY</b>	<b>NO. OF SURVEYED MUNICIPALITIES USING THIS APPROACH</b>
Municipal Staff Person Dedicated to Downtown Issues	45
Private Contractors or Consultants	15
Main Street Organization	13
Other Nonprofit Organizations	12
Chamber of Commerce	10
Downtown Development Organizations	9

## FINANCING ARRANGEMENTS

Responding mayors reported a variety of methods used in financing downtown improvements and activities depending on size of city and location. More than two-thirds of respondents – 85 municipalities (69.7%) – reported Tax

Increment Financing (TIF), with 70 (57.4%) reporting reliance on general property taxes. In addition, 59 municipalities (48.4%) reported using sales tax revenues and 39 (32.0 %) reported using state grants. In still other cases, 29.5% (36 municipalities) rely on funds raised by local agencies such as a downtown nonprofit organization or a chamber of commerce. The diversity in funding sources used emphasizes the broad base of downtown support including use of hotel/motel tax receipts (40 respondents) to promote tourism. Detailed information is unavailable on the amounts or relative importance of each revenue source, and multiple sources may be used depending on the program, event or activity.

Downtowns remain an important source of local revenues in many cities by generating both sales and property taxes. Less-active downtowns may have to rely on other revenue sources as shown above. A brief review of investments in downtowns mentioned by responding municipalities disclosed projects to increase parking, create an entertainment plaza, façade improvement programs, demolishing or rehabilitating buildings and landscape improvements. The continued interest in and support for downtown areas in responding municipalities is clear. These areas often represent the most viable and attractive sites for business starts as well as potential residential areas for groups such as the elderly and young adults interested in a walkable environment, access to entertainment and other amenities.

## **IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES**

There can be little doubt that future successful downtown areas will include new types of activities and serve clientele with different tastes and preferences. Changing age distributions and merchandising approaches will determine the types of goods and services sold and where they are purchased. The survey responses show that many Illinois mayors recognize these shifts and the potential for downtown areas in local economic development efforts.

Respondents reported unique approaches that build on local assets ranging from expanding arts/crafts activities in the area to providing closer links with area recreational opportunities. Key strategies planned for *the next five years* are described next, followed by examples of municipalities implementing them.

The two most common planned strategies include improvements that increase the functionality and attractiveness of the downtown area (98), and increasing the number of visitors by branding, marketing and providing new attractions (88). Next on the list is to explore opportunities for new uses of the downtown

(81). These strategies represent a consistent effort to reshape the downtown for the needs of future populations.

In the future, the clientele for downtown services, especially younger generations, will probably continue to be interested in residential uses. This opportunity was recognized by 46 mayors, who reported efforts to enhance residential and/or entertainment activities including crafts, theaters, galleries, studio space, music venues and similar attractions (46). To bring about these changes, 39 mayors reported plans to help property owners shift to alternative uses such as office space, services, entertainment and other spaces. These efforts can also include expanding public facilities such as administrative offices, libraries, community centers and related public offices.

Conversion or redirection of downtown uses will be supported by infrastructure changes including upgrading Internet access and/or other communications facilities. These improvements expand the downtown potential in two ways. First, they increase traffic, which expands markets for other businesses currently located there as well as for future businesses. This strategy enhances the downtown as a center of social activities and governmental services. Second, expanding the capacity for advanced communications opens the door for business opportunities arising from future technology advances. Improved communications provide opportunities for services including health and education that will be attractive to future downtown residents.

Another set of strategies reported by mayors involves consciously changing the orientation and purpose of the downtown. Highest among these strategies is to increase local activities such as co-working and live-work spaces that make the downtown area more a center for creative activities and interaction, with less focus on traditional retail even though these efforts also boost other economic activities including retail. Communications infrastructure is a critical component in attracting residents interested in these increasingly common work arrangements.

In a related question, 70.3% of responding mayors reported an interest in further developing outdoor recreational assets (waterfront, trail system, state or federal lands, etc.), either within the municipal boundaries or nearby. These efforts can increase the ability of downtowns to draw other tourists and visitors to the recreational areas as well. However, in some instances, attracting this market may require other types of stores or services tailored to these tourists. Public-private partnerships could be pursued to upgrade both the recreational asset and supporting businesses.

Municipalities in Illinois have built on their unique local attractions and assets by designing innovative approaches to enhance their downtown areas. Some Illinois municipalities have linked their downtowns to unique state or local institutions. This strategy has multiple purposes including upgrading the quality of life, expanding markets for local businesses, and in turn making the state or local institution more attractive for new clientele. Several innovative approaches are reported next but many other equally successful efforts could have been included as well.

**Ottawa** (pop. 18,656) used its strategic rural location near the intersection of two interstates (I-39 and I-80), proximity to the Chicago area Starved Rock State Park, and location at the confluence of the Illinois and Fox Rivers to work on place-making issues. Ottawa had been known for many years as a heavy manufacturing (glass) area, but much of that industry is gone. Today, Ottawa emphasizes development of its rapidly growing tourism industry.

In addition to traditional economic development efforts highlighting transportation assets and central location, Ottawa also focuses on recreation and cultural assets. Unique festivals draw tourists from the surrounding area, including metropolitan Chicago, with attractions such as arts and garden tours, tours of historic sites and the I&M Canal, and activities in nearby parks and recreation sites. Ottawa has successfully attracted local food producers in a restaurant and brewery that uses local hops in its processes, along with a farmers' market and similar activities. The Illinois Valley Community College campus in Ottawa enhances local education and cultural opportunities for residents, and the city has further plans for cultural and recreational development along the Illinois River.

Perhaps the key to Ottawa's recent success has been the reinvigoration of its downtown through the use of an aggressive and eye-catching TIF-funded beautification program. This effort caused downtown Ottawa to be recognized by the national America in Bloom organization for "Most Dynamic Transformation of a Downtown Streetscape." Complementing this natural beauty has been a major emphasis on preserving Ottawa's historic downtown architecture and filling historic buildings with new shops and restaurants, making downtown the center of the community.

**Normal** (pop. 54,595) is home to Illinois State University, which is located in close proximity to the central business district. The student body and visiting parents provide a captive market for unique or unusual stores or services. The "uptown" revitalization effort expanded transportation facilities in the area,

which created an uptown circle that provides attractive public space as well as addresses environmental issues. This transportation facility received a National Award for Smart Growth Achievement from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA).

In addition, Normal attracted major hotel and convention center facilities that provide convenient access for visitors that also expand markets for other local businesses. These and similar local investments illustrate an ability to recognize unique or special local opportunities to help reshape the downtown as an economic development asset.

Likewise, **Moline** (pop. 43,052), one of the Quad Cities, is engaged in “The Q” project that plans to create a Quad Cities Multi-Modal Station (MMS), a passenger rail facility located within the downtown area of Moline by 2018. The MMS site is the designated location from which a new passenger rail operation will serve a community that has been without such service for more than 30 years. This rail system will not only create immediate jobs improving rail corridors and building the system, but it will lead to long-term jobs because of private-sector investment in the downtown station area.

“The Q” project has fostered other development projects such as construction of loft apartments and a café in downtown Moline. Another initiative will make approximately eight blocks of potential redevelopment land available for parks, residential or mixed use. This development offers an opportunity to capitalize on market opportunities generated from a true multi-modal facility that integrates rail, bus and river transportation. It also provides connectivity to downtown Moline, which is expected to have substantial new investments in the next five years or so. The project has already gained national recognition through the Federal Sustainable Cities Initiative with additional funding from the U.S. EPA.

**Skokie** (pop. 64,821), adjacent to the City of Chicago, took a different approach by partnering with Forest City Enterprises and repurposing the 24-acre former GD Searle/Pfizer pharmaceutical campus adjacent to the downtown area and creating the Illinois Science + Technology Park (ISTP) in 2005.

The 661,000-square-foot ISTP provides premium-quality technology access to wetlab space and flexible Class A office buildings for life science, bio/nanotechnology and startup companies. Entrepreneurs can obtain various levels of support including counseling on business decisions, operating space and other financial services via ISTP’s incubator, Science Innovation Labs.

The project has yet to reach its full potential because of the Great Recession and lack of expected state funding. Nevertheless, approximately 1,500 employees work at the park with potential for a much larger number if, and when, a full build-out is completed. The property has recently been sold to a Skokie-based developer, American Landmark Properties, with plans to upgrade and expand the facilities, including an additional 140,000-square-foot build-to-suit option.

*Elgin* (pop. 112,111) is another example of an Illinois municipality with substantial private and public investment in arts and culture activities and live-work space in the downtown. The Fox River is the major natural feature of downtown, and the city has focused its efforts on areas in general proximity to the river. Since 2000, Elgin has invested more than \$30 million in riverfront development. The combination of existing facilities and new construction has created an arts-entertainment-recreation hub that includes the Gail Borden Public Library, the Hemmens Cultural Center, the Grand Victoria Casino, The Centre community recreation facility, as well as new housing. An additional \$300 million has been invested in public infrastructure.<sup>3</sup> A more recent project is Elgin Artspace Lofts, opened in 2012 as a mixed-use development, at a cost of more than \$15 million, with 55 units of live-work space plus nearly 6,000 square feet of retail and community space.<sup>4</sup> Efforts by Elgin to make its downtown attractive to new businesses are showing signs of success. Last year, a technology firm purchased a downtown building for its headquarters, citing the desire to be part of an active urban neighborhood.<sup>5</sup> The historic Tower Building was recently purchased and is being renovated to accommodate 45 rental apartments.

*Other states* have organized statewide efforts to revitalize downtown areas, whether through the National Trust for Historic Preservation's National Main Street Center or a growing number of adaptations that build on local resources. The Illinois Main Street Program lost state funding in 2014 after being supported for several years by a USDA-Rural Development grant. While efforts are underway to re-establish this program with other funding sources, the future of the Main Street program in Illinois is uncertain. Some states have turned to public-private financing arrangements along with broad-base support on downtown development issues. Two examples of states focusing on place-making efforts or natural resource-entertainment opportunities are instructive to consider.

The Pennsylvania Downtown Center administers a nature-based place-making program where local revitalization efforts provide civic, tourism and business

resources to help residents build on unique local assets including hospitality and guest services plus shopping and entertainment opportunities.<sup>6</sup> The overall thrust is to make communities attractive and desirable places for people to live and work, which, in turn, leads to business attraction and tourism enhancement. Consequently, local leaders can incorporate multiple local assets in revitalizing and marketing their downtowns or entire communities rather than concentrating on specific projects.

The MIPlace Michigan<sup>7</sup> program targets place-making with a set of coordinated tools that communities can use in local revitalization efforts. At the heart of the program is the recognized need for communities to be places where both businesses and people want to grow and live. This interaction between business, talent and place drives opportunities for residents and local policymakers to design informed development strategies. Effectively using the MIPlace resources requires that participating communities have a well-organized and viable economic development strategy, which is key to any successful local effort and a task that responding mayors rate high in Table 2.

## **LOOKING AHEAD IN ILLINOIS — TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE NEEDS**

When asked about recent successes (during the past three years), 60.1% of respondents reported that past efforts had been moderately or highly successful. While this finding is certainly positive, it also may suggest difficulties in identifying opportunities or in formulating approaches, so mayors were asked about the types of assistance needed in selecting among downtown activities.

When asked about their interest in future efforts to upgrade and enhance their downtowns, 109 (94.0%) asked about possibilities for a statewide thrust to make downtowns more effective in local economic development. They then identified the types of technical assistance that would be needed most in such an effort (Table 3). The largest number of mayors requested technical assistance in creating a plan to recruit downtown businesses (103), help with branding and marketing the downtown (102), access to online economic development tools (100) and planning-visioning based on community input (100). Market analysis (99), surveys of business performance and conditions (99) and training on best local development practices (99) were also mentioned along with other assistance to formulate downtown strategies.

At least limited access to some of this technical assistance already exists in the NIU Center for Governmental Studies *Growing Communities Initiative* (GCI) downtown development toolbox<sup>8</sup> created with USDA-Rural Development

support in 2014. That website contains technical resources for downtown managers as well as comparisons of best practices in other states. The site will expand as part of the GCI initiative currently in its initial stages in the NIU Center for Governmental Studies.<sup>9</sup>

**TABLE 3**  
Rating of Technical Assistance Services Needed

TOPICS	NO INTEREST	MODERATE INTEREST	EXTREME INTEREST	RATING AVERAGE	NUMBER OF RESPONSES
<b>RESPONSES</b>					
Website development for individual businesses	21	53	21	2.00	95
Recruitment plan for downtown businesses	3	39	61	2.56	103
Market analysis for downtown and/or business potential	4	35	59	2.56	98
Planning revitalization efforts	9	37	52	2.44	98
Branding and marketing	6	44	52	2.45	102
Survey of business performance, conditions and plans	16	48	35	2.19	99
Housing inventory and needs analysis	26	50	20	1.94	96
Training in downtown improvement techniques	11	43	43	2.33	97
Online access to economic development tools	8	41	51	2.43	100
Training on best practices in downtown improvement	6	40	53	2.47	99
Assistance with preparing surveys of visitors, customers, employees or residents	16	49	33	2.17	98
Downtown visioning and community input	11	42	47	2.36	100
Other	2	1	1	1.75	4

While the current toolbox links to downtown development resources in other states, it does not address all of the issues listed by mayors responding to the current survey. In response, GCI is expanding the set of services offered to include additional affordable and easily accessible technical assistance in areas such as market research, strategic planning and implementation strategies, as well as expanded online resources. The budget impasse made it difficult for Illinois municipalities to rely on support from state agencies to help them reshape downtowns into vital local economic development strategies. However, technical assistance can be obtained from agencies such as small business development centers, higher education outreach units and on the Internet. In addition, a coordinated statewide initiative such as *Growing Communities Initiative* can help organize local assistance opportunities plus achieve economies of scale in providing training and other support.

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<sup>2</sup> Illinois municipalities larger than 5,000 were surveyed electronically in November 2016.

<sup>3</sup> For more information, please visit <http://elgindevelopment.com/community/downtown-elgin/>.

<sup>4</sup> For more information, please visit <http://www.artspace.org/our-places/elgin-artspace-lofts>.

<sup>5</sup> For more information, please visit <http://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/elgin-courier-news/news/ct-ecn-tech-biz-moving-to-elgin-st-0215-20160213-story.html>.

<sup>6</sup> For more information, please visit <http://www.padowntown.org/programs-services/nature-based-placemaking>.

<sup>7</sup> For more information, please visit <https://www.miplace.org/communities/rrc/>

<sup>8</sup> For more information, please visit <http://www.cgs.niu.edu/DowntownDevelopment/index.shtml>.

<sup>9</sup> For more information, please visit [http://www.cgs.niu.edu/DowntownDevelopment/greatdowntownsgrowingcities\\_4.5.17.pdf](http://www.cgs.niu.edu/DowntownDevelopment/greatdowntownsgrowingcities_4.5.17.pdf).

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