

# HOW SMALL DOWNTOWNS GROW: LESSONS FROM ELMHURST, NAPERVILLE AND NORMAL

STEVE WILSON  
WILSON PLANNING + DESIGN

*This study evaluates the growth of historically small downtown districts by reviewing the evolution of these areas in Elmhurst, Naperville and Normal, Illinois, over the last 30 years. The findings show that these municipalities, despite facing different planning issues, adopted strategies with notable similarities, thus providing important lessons for other communities. The case studies illustrate how municipalities can improve the quality and draw of downtowns by leveraging historic assets, redeveloping underutilized areas with new attractions, engaging public-private partnerships and managing the inevitable “growing pains.”*

## INTRODUCTION

Many downtown districts that were historically quite small have made a comeback in recent years. A half-century ago, as retailers left them in droves for malls and strip centers, these places may have seemed all but obsolete. Today, in response to sustained revitalization and investment, however, numerous downtowns of this type have become the showpieces of suburban and downstate communities. Nevertheless, the number of success stories remains limited, and experience shows that strategies successfully used by some can be hard to replicate.

This study seeks to help municipal officials make cost-effective investments in downtowns by providing at least partial answers to two basic questions: First, how can small downtowns grow and be better “walk-around destinations”? Second, how can they accommodate more businesses, residents and attractions while maintaining their special character? To help officials answer these questions, this study examines the recent redevelopment history of the small but expanding downtowns in Elmhurst, Naperville and Normal. All three had successful outcomes, yet developed in fundamentally different ways. This analysis reviews the dynamics of investments in these areas that include a summary of their development histories while exploring common themes and lessons learned.

## **THE DYNAMICS OF RELATIVELY SMALL DOWNTOWN DISTRICTS**

At least 60 small historic downtowns can be found in metropolitan Chicago, and many more, of course, can be found elsewhere in the state. Before World War II, these were the commercial centers of the independent hamlets and towns that were in many ways autonomous from the massive Chicago Loop business district. These areas served as the primary gathering places for community life and commerce.

Today, even after assuming a more suburban orientation and with their dominance as retail centers having waned, these downtowns retain their roles as gathering places while also being sources of community identity. As noted below, these downtowns provide a distinctive character to communities that seek to avoid falling into a “sea” of suburban sameness (Walker, 2009).

Many small downtowns have advantages that are difficult to replicate, which early downtown revitalization programs recognized by positioning the main street (i.e., the central artery that bisects the business district) as something different than other corridors. Rather than trying to compete with the suburban retail centers in a direct way, preservationists advocated that downtowns stay small, focus on local businesses and niche markets, and preserve the unique charm and distinctness of the place (Burayidi, 2013). Some newer retail formats try to capture this by focusing on the style or layout of the buildings, but, in the end, it has proven to be virtually impossible to replicate the other layers of heritage, history and eclectic ownership that make historic downtowns unique (Burayidi, 2013).

Some communities chose to keep their downtowns small and local in orientation to maintain their historic charm (Francaviglia, 1996). These communities often focused on improving the quality of their tenants and the appearance of the district with the goal of attracting still better tenants and more customers (Robertson, 1999). But at some point, these historic downtowns either withered or reached their growth capacity. In the latter case, downtowns that could not or would not accommodate the tenants that wanted to be downtown risked losing them to less-constrained spaces.

Small historic downtowns tend to grow in two ways: through slow and incremental growth, in which redevelopment occurs lot by lot, generally with in-kind support by municipalities; and through larger redevelopment projects, in which entire blocks or half blocks are replaced with development of a different character. Incremental growth is common for established downtowns

or downtowns with a strong historic building stock (Walker, 2009). Larger redevelopment projects are more typical of historic downtowns that have underutilized areas, such as low-value buildings or parking lots that can be replaced with more intense downtown uses (Robertson, 1999). The analysis below, by design, focuses on the larger redevelopment projects that typically have larger growth impacts, are more complex, and often require government initiative and special regulations to ensure success.

The case studies provided below show that as downtowns grow, they don't just perform more effectively, they perform differently. Business clusters emerge that attract more customers than the individual business would alone. Visitors come to comparison shop, or perhaps without a destination or purchase in mind. Many just want the guarantee that there will be enough to do when they arrive. Cars become inconvenient, encouraging people to park and set out on foot, or arrive by other means (Gibbs, 2012).

## **CASE STUDY SELECTION**

To learn more about how small downtowns grow, the three case studies were selected based on the following criteria:

- They were small at the start of their redevelopment process. Small downtowns are generally the size of a town center or large town center, covering 6 to 40 acres. Buildings are typically 1 to 3 stories tall, versus 3 to 8+ stories of larger historic downtowns. They have experienced considerable growth through redevelopment since 1970 through the formation of larger redevelopment projects covering a half block or a full block, but also with incremental growth.
- They are successful in the sense that they are lively, attractive and have a distinct sense of place.
- They have strong economic performance, and are widely recognized locally and regionally as desirable destinations.
- They vary in terms of size, community profile, location and downtown layout.
- They have a university/college campus nearby, and rail transit within or near the downtown.

Reviewing these three cases illustrates how growth can occur in different ways and under different conditions. In this context, “growth” is defined as

an expanding footprint of the downtown area as well as new building stock achieved through redevelopment and infill. It also includes associated increases in pedestrian activity, the number of visitors, rents, property value and tax

**TABLE 1**  
Case Study Comparison

| <b>COMMUNITY</b>  | <b>NAPERVILLE</b>                         | <b>ELMHURST</b>             | <b>NORMAL</b>               |
|---|---|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>Location Type</b>  | <b>Outer Suburb</b>                       | <b>Inner Suburb</b>         | <b>Downstate</b>            |
| Median Household Income (2010)                              | \$105,585                                 | \$88,236                    | \$40,380                    |
| Population (2016)   | 147,100                                   | 45,950                      | 54,264                      |
| Land Area (sq. mi.)   | 39.2                                      | 10.3                        | 18.7                        |
| Rate of Population Growth (1960-2016)                       | 11.4                                      | 1.2                         | 4.1                         |
| <b>DOWNTOWN</b>   |   |                             |                             |
| 1960 Downtown Footprint                                     | 23 acres                                  | 37 acres                    | 12 acres                    |
| 2017 Downtown Footprint                                     | 60 acres                                  | 66 acres                    | 27 acres                    |
| College Population (adjacent to downtown)                   | 3,060                                     | 3,350                       | 21,040                      |
| 2017 Downtown Businesses - Total                            | 337                                       | 259                         | 55                          |
| Dining  | 56  | 46                          | 23                          |
| Shopping  | 122                                       | 48                          | 12                          |
| Service   | 155                                       | 160                         | 15                          |
| Hotel   | 1 (158 keys)                              | -                           | 2 (342 keys)                |
| Attractions/performance                                     | 4   | 5                           | 5                           |
| Off-street parking (public)                                 | 3,530                                     | 3,443                       | 2,000                       |
| Parking garage spaces                                       | 2,220                                     | 1,607                       | 1,537                       |
| <b>WALKABILITY/ACTIVITY MEASURES</b>                        |   |                             |                             |
| Walk Score (0-100)  | 93  | 90                          | 70                          |
| Mid-Block Pedestrian Count (noon, weekday on busiest block) | 140 people in 10 min. (very high)         | 80 people in 10 min. (high) | 75 people in 10 min. (high) |
| Transit Score (0-100)                                       | 41  | 35                          | 50                          |
| Railroad Station Boardings                                  | 4,000/ weekday (Metra)                    | 2,300/ weekday (Metra)      | 640/day (Amtrak)            |
| Commuter Station Location                                   | ½ mile away, little downtown foot traffic | Central                     | Central                     |

revenue. Although each case considered has a university and rail station nearby, they have enough dissimilarity to allow the salient differences in strategy to be clearly seen.

The case analysis uses a variety of methodologies, including field observations, and a review of literature, data and maps. In addition, the author interviewed more than a dozen representatives of the three cities, including city staff, developers, land owners and design professionals, who were closely involved in various stages of the development process.

## **CASE STUDY REVIEW**

### **NAPERVILLE (POP. 147,100)**

Naperville, an outer-ring suburb located 30 miles west of downtown Chicago, experienced rapid suburban growth beginning in the 1950s. The community grew to be the third-largest city in the metro area after Chicago and Aurora, and has a downtown that was dramatically affected by the suburban growth that surrounds it.

Downtown Naperville is situated in the northern part of the city, near the crossing of the DuPage River and Washington Boulevard, and is bordered by the College of DuPage to the east, Naper Settlement to the south and attractive stable single-family neighborhoods on all sides. The district covers 60 acres but maintains a compact square-shaped form. Most of the shopping and restaurants are concentrated in the center within a few blocks of each other. The liveliest parts of downtown are on the original “main streets” of Washington Street, Jefferson Street and Main Street in the historic core. Anchors include the public library, city hall, the Riverwalk, Hotel Indigo and many national and local retail and restaurant destinations.

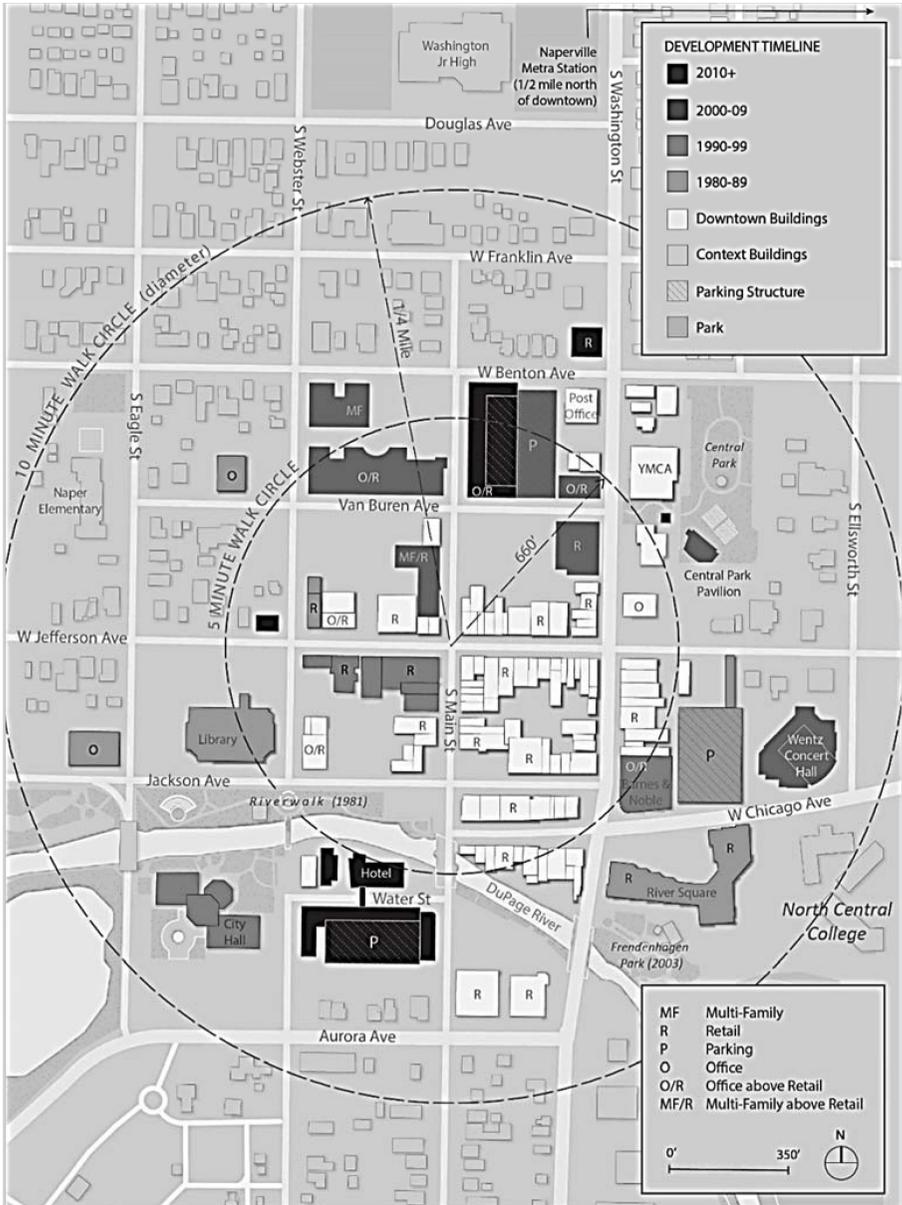
Of the three examples, Naperville has the largest number of businesses and the earliest start in the downtown redevelopment process (Table 1).

### **ORIGINS AND EARLY GROWTH**

In the early 1960s, as businesses left for suburban retail strip centers, downtown Naperville had fallen into a state of decline. By the early 1970s, the problem had become acute. Pessimism loomed when local business owners and city leaders learned of plans for a new regional shopping center that was to open just outside Naperville’s western border (Brown/Heldt Assoc. 1974).

In 1972, the city commissioned the Central District Urban Design Plan to help reposition the downtown. The plan outlined a 20-year growth strategy that would maintain the downtown's compact footprint with continuous retail

**FIGURE 1**  
Naperville Growth Map



frontage, restored facades and double the retail space. The goal was to have it function like the best new shopping centers without looking like one (Brown/Heldt Assoc. 1974). Although many of the proposed improvements were never realized, including the plan's signature project, which would convert all the primary retail streets into pedestrian malls, other projects like Riverwalk park and the new library were ultimately achieved. Most importantly, the stakeholders and city leaders bought into the general strategy and underlying urban design concepts, which ensured that new development would maintain the downtown's compact footprint and urban character.

The most influential and transformative project to come out of the plan, the two-acre Riverwalk park, opened in 1981. This replaced a two-block-long parking lot on the south bank of the river and dramatically changed the appearance of the riverfront, creating a new destination that complemented the downtown commercial activities. In 1986, the new city library was built on land overlooking the new park, and six years later, the new municipal center building was built on the opposite side of the river, following a long political battle to keep it downtown.

## LATER GROWTH

The Riverwalk played a critical role in Naperville's revitalization and spurred nearly three decades of retail, restaurant and office growth. In 2000, this amenity was extended further to connect with Frendenhagen Park, which was completed in 2003.

The first round of commercial redevelopment began in the 1980s, exemplified by the completion of River Square in 1988 and two new office buildings on the west side of downtown. Unfortunately, these followed the conventional suburban development formats, with buildings set back behind parking lots. These developments, however, constituted a significant upgrade from the used car lots and other underutilized sites that had previously reduced the area's appeal to pedestrians.

The second round of commercial redevelopment began in the 1990s on underutilized sites within the historic core, including the retail building on Jefferson between Main and Webster in 1996, which contained Talbots and eventually the present-day Apple Store, and the Barnes & Noble building on Washington and Main in 1998. These important projects brought national retailers to downtown Naperville for the first time.

The third round of commercial development continued through the 2000s, beginning with the first phase of the Main Street Promenade in 2003, and the second phase in 2016, and a new retail building on Washington and Benton in 2005, both located on the north edge of downtown. In 2017, the Water Street District opened on the south bank of the river. The district now contains a number of restaurants and retailers and is anchored by the Hotel Indigo, the downtown's first hotel. New public parking garages, meanwhile, were constructed as part of various commercial developments.

The Central Park Pavillion and North Central College's Wentz Concert Hall, completed in 2002 and 2008, respectively, brought two major performance venues to the east side of downtown. Nevertheless, there have only been a couple of housing redevelopments since the revitalization project began, including a senior housing project, which opened in 2005 and was later converted to college housing, and a small condominium building that opened in 2008. Typically, policies favored using upper floors for offices and services, which generate greater benefits for lunch-time business. Still, housing values are very high, and new high-end multi-family housing is being proposed.

### ELMHURST (POP. 45,950)

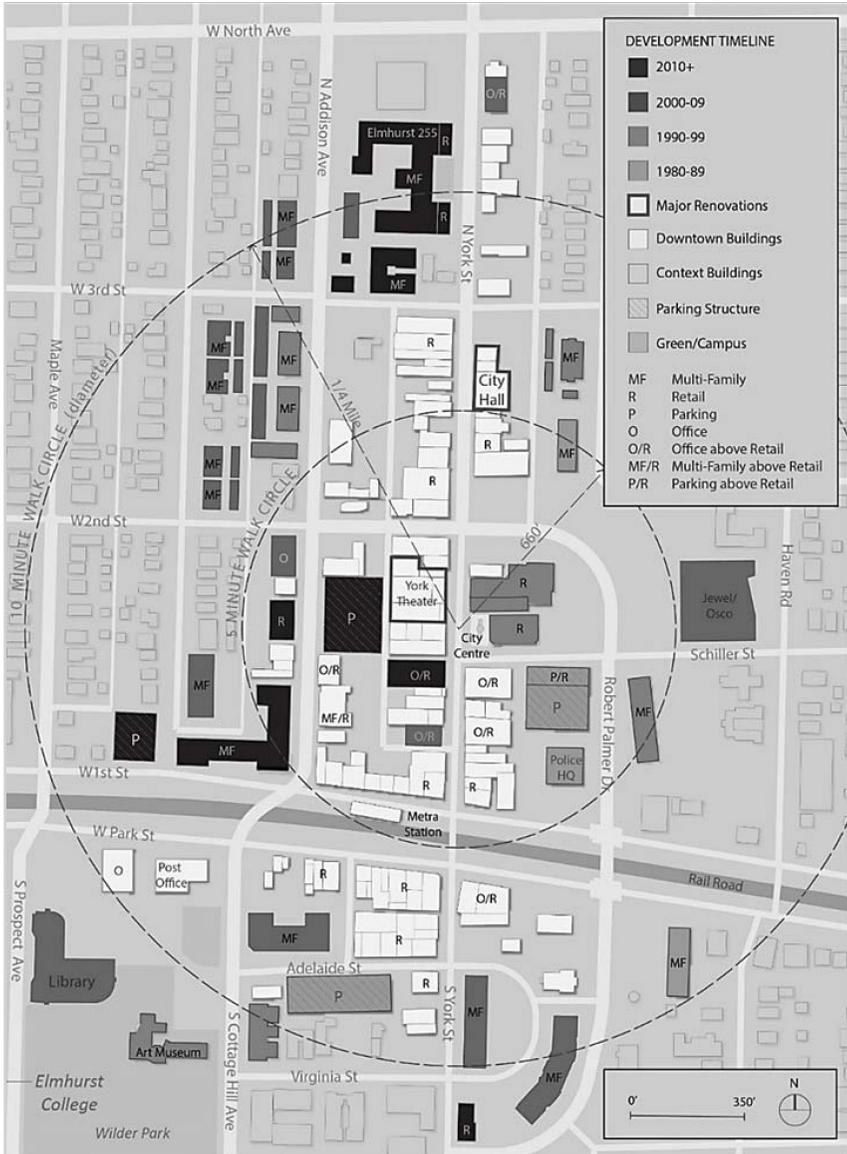
Elmhurst, an inner-ring suburb located 18 miles west of downtown Chicago, is notable for having experienced significant downtown development in recent decades, despite having only modest population growth.

Downtown Elmhurst is located in the geographic center of the city at the crossing of York Street and the Union Pacific rail line. This area is surrounded by attractive, predominately single-family neighborhoods, which transition to multi-family buildings along the downtown edge. Elmhurst College lies a half mile southwest of the downtown core. Nearby, the Elmhurst Metra Station, which is one of the busiest in the Metra system, has over 2,300 boardings per day and generates a great deal of foot traffic for local businesses during rush hour.

Downtown is home to 254 businesses, which puts it in the middle of the three case studies considered here. Most shops and restaurants are clustered around the Metra station and the blocks immediately north and south along York Street. York Theater and the City Centre Plaza are the main downtown anchors, but other notable destinations include the public library, art museum, history museum and city hall.

Originally, the downtown centered on the station and straddled both sides of the tracks, but as it grew, the shops migrated north to the vicinity of the historic York Theater. Today, the downtown is over a mile long, and effectively functions as three distinct districts: the area south of the tracks, which is associated with the college; the two blocks along York Street immediately north of the tracks, and

**FIGURE 2**  
Elmhurst Growth Map



which is the primary retail/restaurant area anchored by York Theater; and the two blocks along York Street north of Second Street, which is anchored by city hall and a new mixed-use housing project.

## ORIGINS AND EARLY GROWTH

Since Elmhurst is closer to Chicago than Naperville, it felt the impact of suburbanization much sooner. In 1962, the Oakbrook Center, a regional shopping mall, opened a mere 3½ miles from its downtown. Two years later, its struggling central business district lost its once-prized Sears department store. By 1987 Oakbrook Center had grown to two million square feet and, to make matters worse, had non-compete agreements with all the mall tenants within a five-mile radius.

Although the city began developing plans for revitalization as early as 1973, little progress was initially made. In 1980, the city commissioned the Downtown Redevelopment Program, which laid out what would eventually become the City Centre project. For the next five years, however, progress was modest, and advocates grew concerned that property owners and the city government, which tended to be fiscally conservative, were impeding progress (TPAP, 1990).

By 1987, however, efforts to free up a core city block for redevelopment had begun in earnest. The Jewel grocery store on the block was relocated a block east, and eventually expanded into a Jewel/Osco superstore in 2002. In 1989, a new police station was built just south of the existing one, and the old facility was demolished to make way for a parking garage. In 1992, city hall was relocated a block north into a renovated former school building, freeing up prime acreage on the block.

During this same period, the York Theater and nearby edifices were undergoing major renovations, resulting in the conversion of this aging single-screen theater into a modern multiplex, which opened in 1991. Four years later, the ambitious City Centre project was completed, replete with three new restaurants and a new plaza and fountain. The combined City Centre/York Theater project completely revitalized the core of downtown Elmhurst, drawing foot traffic, strengthening retail sales and bolstering the image of the district.

## LATER GROWTH

Several more redevelopment projects soon drew upon the momentum of the above projects. These improvements, however, centered on multi-family housing, beginning with an eight-story apartment building created

in conjunction with City Centre in 1990, which to this day is the city's tallest downtown building. In the 1990s, several four- and five-story condominium buildings emerged in the southern parts of downtown near the Metra station. In the early 2000s, several three- and four-story apartment buildings and townhouses replaced single-family homes north of the tracks adjacent to residential neighborhoods. In 2017, a six-story 200-unit apartment building, Elmhurst 255, which is notable for having ground-floor retail, was completed on an old city parking lot. The result is a major new retail anchor that reinforces the north downtown district around city hall. In 2018, a new 165-unit apartment building is slated for completion on Addison along the tracks.

As in Naperville, Elmhurst placed emphasis on keeping public buildings downtown, showcased by a new art museum and public library developed in 1999 and 2005, respectively, on the district's southwest fringe. These civic uses generate some foot traffic that enlivens the immediate area, but, unfortunately, they are too far-removed to enhance the main retail area.

Unlike downtown Naperville, parking in downtown Elmhurst serves both local businesses and commuters, and a significant share is reserved for Metra riders. In 1987, Elmhurst developed its first two parking garages on Adelaide Street just south of the station, and on Schiller Street next to the new City Centre project, which featured ground level retail. In 2010, the East Parking Garage was added, and in 2016, the Central Parking Garage opened next to the York Theater to serve growing demand in the core downtown area.

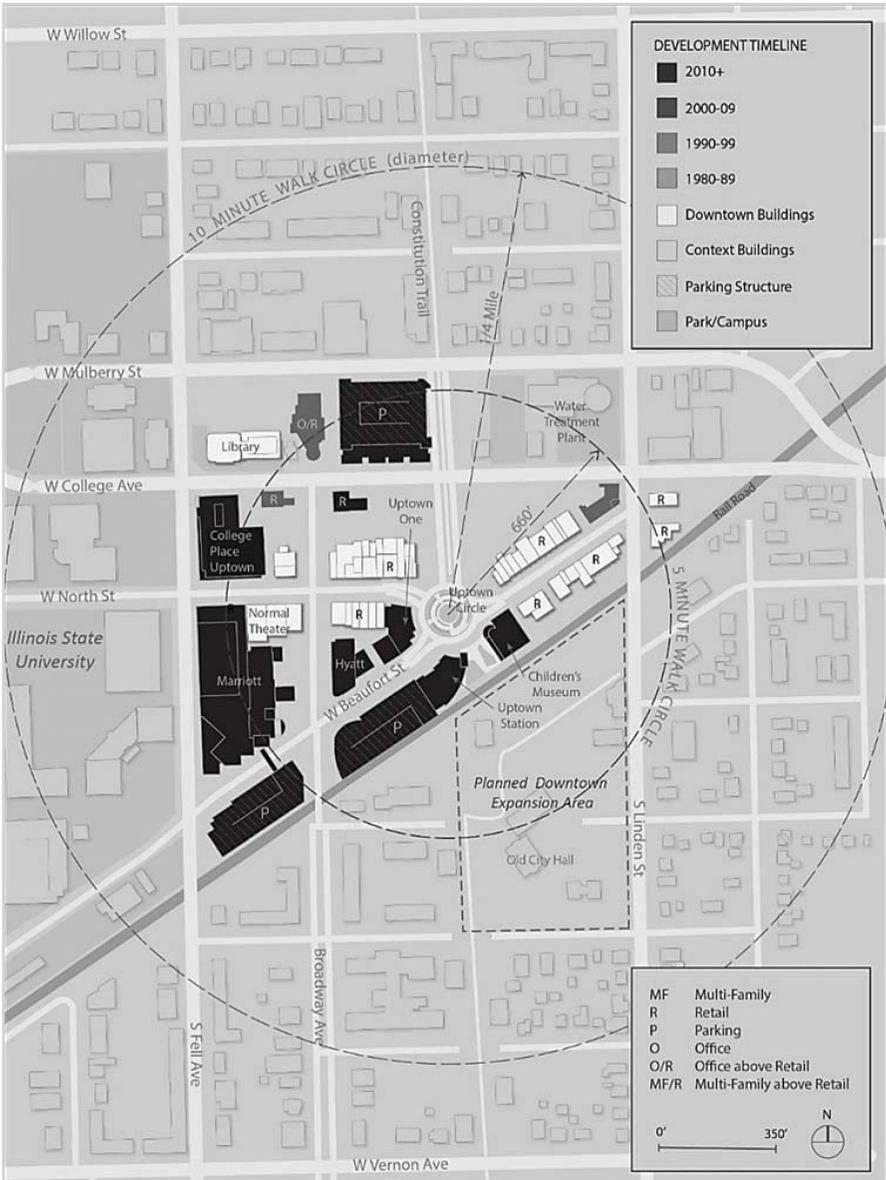
#### NORMAL (POP. 54,264)

The Town of Normal, home of Illinois State University (ISU), is located 120 miles southwest of Chicago and 60 miles north of Springfield. This community serves as an example of a successful campus town located outside a major metropolitan area. Normal is often regarded as having a "twin city," Bloomington, which has a population of 78,000 and is the county seat.

Downtown Normal, renamed "Uptown" in 2008, was founded at the crossing of two rail lines on the north side of Bloomington. Its dominant land uses include ISU's main campus on the west, neighborhoods of moderate density dominated by student housing on the north and south, and single-family neighborhoods on the east. Nevertheless, its relatively compact footprint covers only 27 acres, making it only half the size of the two other cases evaluated.

Uptown Circle, which is the downtown's signature park and traffic circle, constitutes the center of the new downtown area and is fronted by the town hall, the Children's Discovery Museum and a new mixed-use building called One Uptown on the Circle. The town hall building, called Uptown Station, also

**FIGURE 3**  
Normal Growth Map



houses the Normal-Bloomington Amtrak station, which serves 10 trains per day, generating foot traffic for the local businesses. Although Uptown has just 57 businesses, less than half the number in the other two cases, it boasts several notable anchor institutions, as noted above. Uptown's liveliest parts tend to be along the historic "main streets" of North Street and Beaufort Street.

## ORIGINS AND EARLY GROWTH

In the 1970s, the shops along North Street and Beaufort Street were in the midst of a losing battle with suburban retail centers. A lack of investment perpetuated the downtown's decline and created signs of neglect (Farr Assoc. 2001). Despite ISU's bustling campus, which was only a few blocks away and experiencing tremendous growth, few "spillover" benefits to the downtown businesses could be seen (Farr Assoc. 2001).

To remedy this situation, the town commissioned the 2000 Downtown Renewal Plan, a bold redevelopment strategy calling for retaining most of the historic main street buildings while replacing adjacent areas that were underutilized. Uptown Circle, which replaced an intersection that many considered awkward with a traffic circle and park, would be the focal point for redevelopment, although its completion would take years. While many of the plan's details evolved, the framework outlining streets and blocks and the urban design principles that called for a denser urban downtown all remained firmly in place.

The implementation phase began immediately after the plan's adoption in 2001, with a 2003 Tax Increment Finance Plan regarded as a milestone. This plan refined the layout and shifted major projects closer to the university. Town leaders helped steer critical projects to the downtown, including the Children's Discovery Museum, which was given a new home in 2005 that put it on the Uptown Circle when the latter project was finally completed. Even more ambitious in scale was the Marriott Hotel and Conference Center, which would become a major draw and served to elevate the status of Uptown. Finished in 2009, its opening was followed by Uptown Circle's completion the following year and Uptown Station in 2012. In just a few years, Uptown Normal had undergone a complete transformation.

## LATER GROWTH

These developments laid the groundwork for other investments, including College Place Uptown, a five-story building with student housing and university offices above retail, which opened in 2010, strengthening the link between

Uptown and ISU. A year later, a four-story apartment building was added to the side of the College Avenue parking deck, followed by the construction of the Hyatt Place Hotel in 2016. In 2017, One Uptown on the Circle, a four-story mixed-use building with high-end residential and city offices over a ground floor restaurant, is scheduled to open. Sidetracked for years due to the Great Recession, it fills one of the three remaining gaps around the circle.

Of the many sites envisioned for redevelopment in the 2000 Downtown Renewal Plan, only two major ones remain, both of which were originally intended to have the tallest buildings in Uptown. These buildings will fill the remaining gaps on the circle, linking the two legs of “main street” together. With most of the units filled, One Uptown on the Circle is demonstrating that a market exists for higher-end non-student housing.

As its growth options became more limited due to this development, the town commissioned the 2015 Master Plan Update to study redevelopment options on the south side of the tracks. The new plan envisions this district being anchored by the relocated and expanded Normal Public Library, and linked to the north side with a new pedestrian concourse under the tracks (Farr, 2015).

#### **FIGURE 4**

Aerial view of Normal Uptown Circle



Source: Town of Normal, Illinois

The aerial view in Figure 4 shows Normal's Uptown Circle, which is fronted by the town hall, the Children's Discovery Museum, and a new mixed-use building called One Uptown on the Circle. A portion of the community's Amtrak station is visible at far left.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

Despite their differences, several common themes emerge from the case study analysis:

1. Each community started with a plan to intensify development while placing emphasis on preserving its historic core. In all the examples, the downtowns were suffering from years of decline and needed ambitious planning to provide a new direction. The municipalities each commissioned plans that established the vision that spelled out the character of the development they sought to create, the priority streets and blocks, and the potential for the redevelopment of older buildings. Although details and priorities changed during the implementation stage, the basic principles endured and proved essential to creating effective standards, policies and regulations.
2. Each community had a transformational redevelopment project in its downtown that accelerated the revitalization process. Naperville's Riverwalk, Elmhurst's City Centre and Normal's Uptown Circle dramatically improved the image of their community's downtown and became major attractions and civic gathering points. Due to their complexity, it took 7 to 15 years to set up and implement these projects after the planning process was complete. Success required sustained support from municipal leaders, staff and stakeholders, who did not waiver during a long and challenging redevelopment process.
3. Each community incrementally improved the quality and performance of historic main streets while adding new activity generators to support them. The municipalities all focused on the appearance of their main streets through such measures as façade improvement programs, streetscape improvements, parks and plazas, public art and other civic projects. Existing landlords and tenants, motivated by these enhancements and the improving prospects for the downtown, or simply taking pride of ownership, initiated their own building and site improvement projects. The growing aesthetic appeal of these areas spurred foot traffic which, in turn, contributed to retail sales.

In all three cases, the main streets continued their historic role of being the highest generators of pedestrian traffic of any downtown street. This may stem

in part from their geographic legacy, but credit also belongs to the programing along these streets and the arrangement of attractions around them. When new commercial projects are located within a block or two of a main street, these cases show, the effect is often more foot traffic from casual walking and window-shopping. Nearby attractions such as parks, museums and hotels serve a complementary purpose, creating a series of overlapping pedestrian routes whose vibrancy generates still more sidewalk activity on the main street, drawing more people eager to join the action (Whyte, 1988).

4. Each community had strong public-private partnerships involving the business community and developers. All three also maintained strong relationships with the downtown businesses. While the municipalities' primary role was setting the direction for the district, managing problems and promoting the downtown, each nevertheless cultivated partnerships with developers interested in pursuing projects critical to the plan's vision but not able to finance them, often due to the fact they were relatively new to the marketplace. Municipalities set high expectations for new development while accepting variations if they would result in the right outcome. In some cases, subsidies were provided to developers to "close the deal" with investors and tenants.

5. Each community managed growing pains by updating plans and streamlining regulations to keep pace with development opportunities coming before them. The financial constraints facing development often results in downtown growth occurring in unconventional ways. Tall buildings sprout up next to short ones, historic edifices are juxtaposed with modern ones, and surface parking lots are left scattered throughout. Quality is often mediocre in the beginning but improves as the district matures. As time goes by, preferences change, building types evolve and public sensitivities shift. The three municipalities, therefore, periodically updated their plans and codes, keeping pace with evolving standards and setting new goals for development.

## **CONCLUSION**

Several trends may work in favor of municipalities seeking to expand the role of small and historic downtowns. Pressures for infill redevelopment may rise as the suburbs mature, causing more growth to turn inward (CMAP, 2017, Reinvestment and Infill). The growing popularity of on-demand ride-sharing services — and eventually autonomous vehicles — may dramatically reduce the need for on-site parking, freeing up valuable land and enabling higher densities

(CMAP, 2017, Walkable Futures). Shifting preferences favoring walkable neighborhoods may draw residents to relatively dense mixed-use areas (CMAP, 2017, Walkable Futures). Similarly, retail customers may favor experience-rich downtown shopping rather than “warehouse-like” environments, in part due to the tendency for more staples being readily purchased online (McGee, 2107) (Corkery, 2017). As the three cases described show, with leadership and vision, small downtowns can be transformed in response to these changes, becoming even more attractive and vibrant than in the recent past.

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*Steve Wilson is Principal and Owner of Wilson Planning + Design.*

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