

# Downtown Idea Exchange

## Perspectives

### Public safety in a downtown area is always a sound investment

By Peter Coyne

The keys to attracting merchants and shoppers to a downtown area aren't only marketing and a clean environment. If area visitors and shoppers are afraid to visit due to a real or perceived threat, your district will not reach its full potential.

When preparing a downtown organization's budget, public safety/security is an often-overlooked cost. This attitude is harmful as it ultimately impacts the area because shoppers and residents will stay away if they do not feel safe. While many budgets are tight, this budget line should not be done away with.

**Uniformed officers give shoppers and visitors easy access to law, order, and info.** Depending on the size of the district, downtown directors may be able to rely on local law enforcement as their security presence. However, mid-to-large downtowns need additional coverage beyond what the local police can provide.

Having officers patrol a downtown has many advantages beyond crime prevention. These officers are management's extra eyes and ears on the street. A downtown manager can only walk one block at a time and for only part of the day. These officers are out patrolling all day long and can observe and report to downtown management issues that need to be addressed by those other than the police.

Instances of garbage, graffiti, street light outages, potholes and cracked sidewalks are just a few of the problems that can be observed, reported, and corrected in a timely manner. Furthermore, these officers represent the downtown by being visible in uniform and offering assistance to people on the street.

Instead of having to call or visit the downtown office and speak to a manager, shoppers and visitors with questions about directions or infor-

mation about the district can easily locate a uniformed officer and get answers on the spot. With basic first aid training, these officers also offer assistance to sick or injured people before police or EMS workers arrive on the scene.

**Sidewalk ambassadors provide friendly, helpful faces with less formality and expense.** Some downtowns that want to enjoy the benefits described above but don't like the idea of uniformed

security officers have implemented an "ambassador program." Ambassadors can be cost-effective and even free. By utilizing part-time em-

ployees or college students as interns, the downtown can put people on the street with easily identifiable shirts or jackets and forego police-style uniforms.

Students majoring in business, marketing or criminal justice are a good source for filling these positions. The drawback to ambassadors is if they witness a crime in progress, they can't (and shouldn't) physically intercede, whereas a trained security professional can and would.

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***"Not all security solutions necessitate the use of security officers or CCTV systems."***

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**Assess needs, explore options, and get an estimate.** Once you decide on what type of security you need, it is time to budget for this expense. I urge caution at this stage. Some downtowns take an arbitrary figure and see what that can buy them. My advice is to assess your needs, explore options, and get a cost estimate.

If you have a security professional on staff, he/she can survey the district, speak with local law

enforcement and make a determination as to what security posture should be taken.

If you don't have a security expert on staff, I recommend you hire a consultant who specializes in security assessments. It is preferable to hire a consultant who doesn't provide guard services or technology solutions, as they may make self-serving recommendations. A reputable consultant will outline your options with varying

cost increments so you can make an informed decision.

Keep in mind, that not all security solutions necessitate the use of security officers or CCTV systems. Improved lighting, graffiti removal, improved security gates, and planters are just some of the alternatives that are cost-friendly and security-effective.

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