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## Cities Teach Downtown Lessons

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**Tampa will have to forge its own path to creating a dynamic downtown. But Chattanooga and Memphis in Tennessee - and cities as close as St. Petersburg and Orlando - can offer inspiration and some hard-fought lessons.**

**The answers are not universal. What works in San Diego might not work here, city leaders say.**

**For example, San Diego's port paid for its convention center, freeing the city to concentrate on other projects, and nonprofit foundations and philanthropic patrons jump-started Chattanooga's rebirth.**

**Tampa could never count on such largess. But studying other success stories could offer insight that could save Tampa time and investment.**

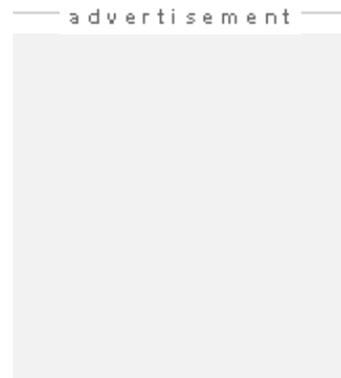
**Mark Huey, Tampa's economic development administrator, visited San Diego, Denver, Chattanooga, West Palm Beach and St. Petersburg to see how they transformed their downtowns.**

**"Everywhere I've gone, I've learned something applicable and interesting," he says. "Every city has its own culture, its own serendipity in how it developed. I try to experience the process - to see what is driving the process, to ask what they wish they hadn't done and learn from them."**

**The common denominator of successful downtowns, he says, is tenacity by leaders. That includes ones in the public realm, nonprofit groups, residents and business leaders.**

**"It is the attitude: 'We are committed to our downtown, and we are going to see it through,' " he says.**

### Chattanooga Shining Example



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**Chattanooga had that kind of tenacity in committed community leaders in government, philanthropic foundations, businesses, nonprofit groups and among its residents.**

**Otis White, president of Civic Strategies, which does consulting work with cities, nonprofit groups and universities, says in the 1960s and '70s Chattanooga was known as the most polluted city in the United States. Smog was so thick, motorists used headlights during the day.**

**White says some cities have to hit rock-bottom to get motivated. That's what happened in Chattanooga.**

**In the early '80s, residents started forging a vision, creating budgets and changing policies to clean up their downtown Tennessee River waterfront. They changed laws and regulations to improve the city's air, built a riverwalk anchored by the Tennessee Aquarium, encouraged developers to build hotels, restaurants, shops and housing downtown.**

**Success spawned more businesses and housing downtown. Between 1990 and 2000, downtown residents jumped 29 percent.**

**Six banks and seven foundations initially fueled the not-for-profit RiverCity Co. with \$12 million. A major highway was rerouted to give the waterfront a more pedestrian feel.**

**In all, 4,300 residents became involved in the redevelopment efforts. Now the city serves as a model for downtown development overseen by government, nonprofit groups, business interests and city residents.**

**"Today, it would take a neutron bomb dropping on Chattanooga to eliminate the changes it has made," White says.**

### **Memphis More Than Elvis**

**Memphis, home to Graceland, the blues and Beale Street, could serve as another example on how diverse interests with a common vision can push a city toward a goal.**

**In the 1920s, '30s and '40s, Beale Street thrived with blues clubs, restaurants and other businesses. By the early '70s, many downtown clubs and storefronts were boarded up. Tourists avoided the area. Memphis residents didn't want to visit, much less live, downtown.**

**Starting in the mid-'70s, as in Chattanooga, diverse public and private groups came together to transform Beale Street and other parts of downtown. The city bought three blocks of Beale Street. A corporation was formed to create an entertainment district. Local developers built or renovated hotels, housing and retail complexes. Since then, a downtown minor-league ballpark has been added, along with high-end housing, new hotels, clubs, shops, restaurants and other businesses.**

**Now instead of long-closed nightspots, Beale Street features 25 clubs, restaurants and shops, including B.B. King's Blues Club and a Hard Rock Cafe.**

**The rebirth continues. The Memphis Cook Convention Center underwent a \$95 million expansion, adding a 35,000-square-foot hall and a 2,100-seat center for the performing arts. The Memphis Marriott Downtown, overlooking the Mississippi River, recently opened a \$14 million, 14-story tower, with 200 more rooms and expansive meeting space.**

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## Florida Cities Change, Too

For a vibrant urban core, Tampa only needs to look across the Bay to downtown St. Petersburg.

The region's second-largest city boasts high-rise condominiums, a university, office buildings, a Major League Baseball team, the largest public marina in Southwest Florida, museums, arts, dining and shops.

Long a hub for retirees, downtown St. Petersburg has become a 24/7 place, with new urban residents as well as tourists walking to shops, restaurants and attractions.

Since 1982, when downtown redevelopment began, more than \$1.5 billion in public and private funding has been invested. Much of the focus has been on re-energizing downtown along its 7-mile-long waterfront park system, perhaps the city's biggest natural asset.

Residential development has dominated downtown growth in recent years, fueled by younger people and empty nesters who work there or want to be near its museums, nightlife and other attractions.

Orlando provided incentives for residential developers to come downtown.

With nearly \$20 million of incentive money since 1998, Orlando's Community Redevelopment Agency has lured residential developers and entrepreneurs to revitalize the city's downtown.

Incentive programs were established to repair old buildings, develop new apartments and condominiums and turn downtown Orlando into a 24-hour city where people can live, work and play.

More than 1,500 residential units have been built or are planned for Orlando's downtown area, which expected to double its population.

It takes a mix of public and private investment to make downtown redevelopment efforts work, said urban planner Alexander Garvin, an adjunct professor at Yale University.

"If the quality of life in town is not attractive, nobody is going to move there," Garvin said.

*Researcher Diane Grey and reporters Carlos Moncada and Andy Reid contributed to this report. Reporter Karen Haymon Long can be reached at (813) 259-7618.*

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