

Great Downtowns GROWING CITIES

The Renewed Importance of Downtown

In the past, retail trade and manufacturing were mainstays of economic growth but today's growing economies trade in information, ideas, and creative activities. Technological advances have changed the way people shop, do business, communicate, and participate in entertainment. Freed from the need to locate in a specific place, entrepreneurs now choose where to site and build their businesses based on places that best meet their needs for community, culture, recreation, housing, and connection with peers. They desire locations that support their lifestyle and encourage their enterprises to grow. They are looking for a special place, and a vibrant downtown is often key to whether a specific city is that place.



Why a New Downtown Approach Now?



Vibrant downtowns in cities, large and small, will be critical in determining whether this generation of entrepreneurs chooses to locate in Illinois. The growing importance of creative enterprises, walkable environments, and shared access to technology gives downtowns of all sizes untapped potential to attract businesses, residents, visitors and jobs by leveraging past investments in public infrastructure and private buildings. Great Downtowns Growing Cities (GDGC) supports the realization of that potential so communities can successfully attract future growth.

Local public officials and community leaders have requested assistance in managing the transition to new economic opportunities. A place-based economic growth program can provide technical support to assist Illinois downtowns in developing a physical, financial, and regulatory environment that encourages entrepreneurial success.

What is GDGC?

GDGC is a statewide initiative that enables any community, and/or neighborhoods within larger cities, to proactively address large scale market, technological and demographic trends through downtown enhancement. GDGC provides tools to enhance downtowns as economic centers for community wide growth based on entrepreneurship, innovation and quality of place. GDGC is a community-driven program, with services provided and financed in ways that reflect the interests and inputs from participating communities.

This downtown initiative will be managed by the Center for Governmental Studies at Northern Illinois University (CGS). Through collaboration with other universities, nonprofit organizations, and private sector expertise, GDGC brings a wide range of services to large and small communities across the state.

What Does GDGC Offer?

GDGC provides Illinois communities with downtown services similar to those available in neighboring states, including personalized assistance, on-going training, cutting edge data bases, and a peer network to share resources. Tools for downtown enhancement already exist in CGS and other sources will be further developed as funding is secured.



CGS will coordinate and expand the research and training efforts for downtown enhancement developed previously in conjunction with state agencies and communities statewide. The GDGC website, <http://cgs.niu.edu/DowntownDevelopment/index.shtml>, currently includes best practices, resources on many topics, and development tools for use in daily decisions. A recent CGS statewide survey of Illinois municipalities, in conjunction with the Illinois Municipal League, documented issues faced in downtowns, how these programs are managed, technical assistance needed, and other topics. The information collected will be incorporated into GDGC resources and services.

How will GDGC be funded?

The GDGC effort will be financed with revenue from several sources including partner investments, state/federal grants, contributions from private sources (e.g. foundations, businesses serving municipalities, financial institutions, and utilities), conference sponsorships, and revenues from services provided on a cost-recovery basis. The program can be scaled to fit the revenue available, with services expanded when additional funds such as grants are available and more focused at other times.

While GDGC is not a membership organization, annual partnership levels of investment are based on the fees for membership in organizations serving similar audiences and downtown programs in other states.

Participation Investment Schedule

Partner Communities invest a fixed amount according to a schedule and this investment makes them eligible for a specific set of services as well as discounts on other services as selected.

Partnership levels will be based on GDGC budgetary requirements and affordability for partner communities.

Preliminary estimates of investment levels are:

Population	Estimated Annual Investment
Less than 2,500	\$1,000
2,501 to 5,000	1,500
5001 to 10,000	2,000
10,001 to 25,000	2,500
25,001 and above	3,000

Partners will also receive a template suggesting sources of local funds such as banks, utilities, city agencies or other local groups to help finance their participation in the program.

Fixed Services Provided to Partner Communities

1. GDGC will offer a specific number (3-4) of workshops at strategic locations across the state. The workshops will have high-quality speakers and will be patterned after the series of workshops that CGS provided as part of a statewide effort in 2012-2013. Partner communities can attend workshops of their choice as part of their annual investment. Other communities will pay a registration fee.



2. GDGC will compile and analyze reinvestment statistics and other data for partners. Partner communities will have electronic access to tabulated data, either directly or through prepared reports.
3. An annual report on downtown activities and best practices across Illinois will be sent to partner cities who can submit projects to be considered for inclusion.
4. Partners will receive a quarterly newsletter that shares ideas from downtowns in Illinois and other states. It will also provide discussions by scholars and practitioners on specific topics.
5. Partners will receive help with preparing one survey per year for their community. CGS will to administer the electronic survey and tabulate the results.
6. GDGC will provide a network of individuals working in downtown development. Partner communities can participate in this network sharing best practices, expertise, and tools to grow their downtowns.
7. GDGC will pursue grant funding on a regular basis to address issues and potential projects of interest to Illinois communities. Partners will participate in deciding types of projects to prioritize for grant funding and also have priority for grant funded projects.



NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

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Outreach, Engagement, and Regional Development

Optional Services from which Partner Communities Can Select

In addition to the fixed set of services, partner communities will receive a discount on other services offered through GDGC. Examples of these services follow:

1. On-site advisory visit to downtown by GDGC personnel or affiliated professionals.
2. Assistance in working with a NIU academic department(s) to find potential students to complete internships on downtown projects in or near their home communities. Internship stipends, work requirements, and other details will be arranged between University departments and local organizations.
3. Special surveys on downtown issues arranged with GDGC on a fee schedule related to complexity, length, and report desired.
4. CGS staff will conduct tailored research on specific issues requested by partner communities through an internet search, professional contacts, or other avenues on a cost-recovery basis.
5. Several types of standardized data profiles can be requested by a partner such as a retail profile, an industrial profile, a tourism profile or others designed to assist in marketing, attracting retailers, or increasing tourism potential.
6. An annual statewide conference featuring best practices in Illinois and other states will be hosted by GDGC.
7. Downtown businesses will have access to NIU's *Springboard* program. Through this program, a business poses a problem or task to a team of NIU students in a related major who then explore viable solutions.



Main Street will be one component of GDGC and communities wishing to affiliate with the National Main Street Program can do so through GDGC participation.



What's Next?

GDGC services will expand as funding becomes available and community support grows. Grants, private donations and collaboration with state agencies will be solicited to expand services. Communities can help launch GDGC soon by indicating their intention to participate. Input from communities on desired services is encouraged. For additional information, contact Mim Evans at mevans@niu.edu or Norman Walzer at nwalzer@niu.edu or visit: <http://cgs.niu.edu/DowntownDevelopment/index.shtml>.