

Merced mulls new vision of downtown

By [John Derby](#)

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From the look of the slide on the screen, one might have been looking at downtown Merced some years ago. The buildings looked drab and unimproved and there was little or no movement.

However, this was not Merced. It was Ashville, North Carolina, and the downtown was in worse shape.

Business had moved to the Mall in the north of town, and the core of the community was drying up and blowing away.

Then some people who had a stake in downtown Ashville asked the question: “Why is downtown Ashville dying?” The answers started coming in little by little. Mainly the reason was that the buildings were vacant and nobody was living in the downtown core.

This stimulated a couple of property owners with deep pockets, and the help from the city and state, to turn downtown properties into a combination of business and residential locations.

To the surprise of the investors, there was a line up for living in the downtown area. As many as 20 percent of the residents didn’t own cars and find the need for them. Eventually 70 restaurants opened in downtown Ashville, some of which received international acclaim as in the case of one vegetarian restaurant. Twenty breweries also opened up and provided a wide variety of local beers.



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The town, which at one time could shoot a canon ball down Main Street without fear of hitting anyone, now is a vibrant city, and the downtown district provides more real estate taxes than all the rest of the city.

Joseph Minicozzi, the speaker and a lead researcher for Urban 3, was introduced by Jennifer West of the Greater Merced Chamber of Commerce. His firm teamed up with the Local Government Commission of California and California Infill Builders Association to speak on the advantages of revitalizing downtowns, as opposed to building shopping malls --- further and further from the downtown core.

The big issue is the value of real estate. Revitalized downtowns pay much higher property tax revenues to the city and the county than properties like Walmart and the Merced Mall.

In a recent study of Merced, Modesto and Turlock performed by Urban3, the property tax rate for an assortment of downtown properties was significantly higher than the per acre fees which their counterparts outside the downtown core were paying.

“Thinking like a farmer can benefit your community,” according to Minicozzi and the research he has conducted. If local governments are receiving greater income from the downtown core, then why don’t they focus more attention and resources on making these properties more viable?

Minicozzi did not get an immediate answer, however, there were many representatives in the audience from local government and the question did not fall on deaf ears.

The meeting was one of a number planned by the Greater Merced Chamber of Commerce for this year. It was held at Fernando’s Bistro in downtown Merced, but if this attendance was an example, these meetings may be “reservations only” in the future.



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